

4
NOVEL

Reincarnated as a SWORD

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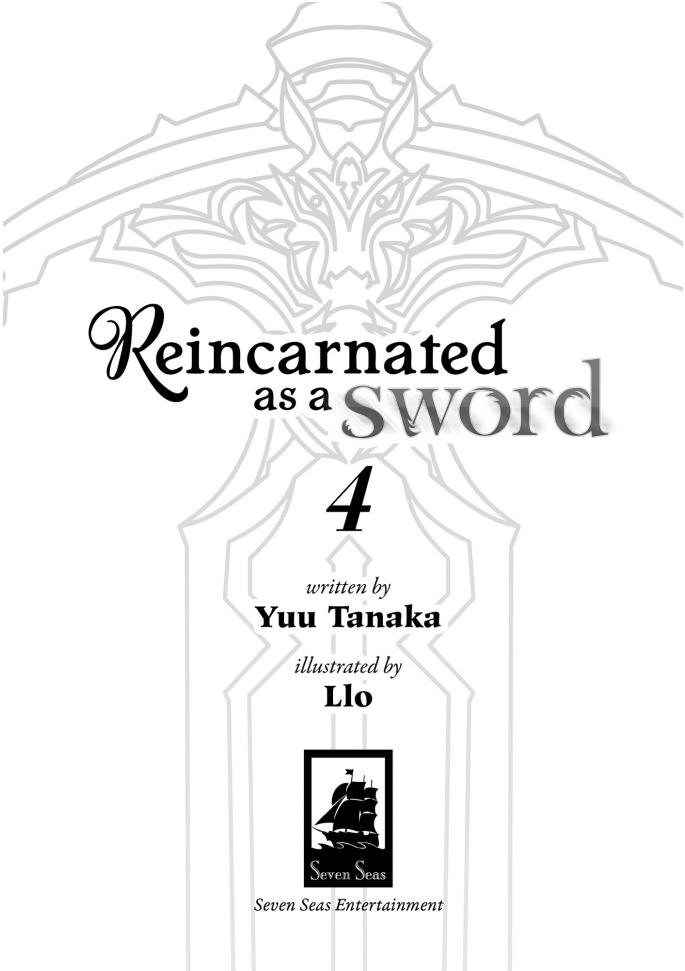
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Seven Seas Entertainment

REINCARNATED AS A SWORD VOL. 4

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Illustrations by Llo

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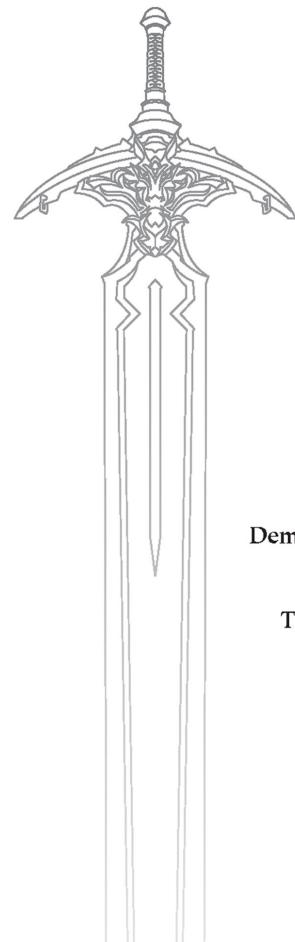
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ISBN: 978-1-64505-196-1
Printed in Canada
First Printing: February 2020
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 1: The Chefs' Guild and the Contest

Evening fell on the day we left Seedrun. Soon, we'd arrive at Bulbola, the greatest of all harbors in the kingdom of Granzell.

The journey should have taken us ten days, but we got there under a day with a little help from the Water Dragon. It was immensely fast, and no monsters dared accost us.

However, the Water Dragon couldn't make port at Bulbola. Not at the moment, anyway. That wasn't to say Bulbola's harbors weren't big enough—no, they had more than enough room for a Water Dragon or two. But Water Dragons required advance notice to make port at the harbor city. I say "advance notice," but with all the paperwork involved, it was more akin to gaining authorization.

Which was fair enough, really. The Water Dragon was a B-Threat monster. A single one could sink a small island nation. So making port was difficult, even if the creature was under contract.

In modern Earth terms, it was like an aircraft carrier shuffling into a civilian harbor. The slightest misunderstanding could trigger an all-out war, and panic was definitely a given.

Instead, we contacted the Lucille Trade Association, which was based in Bulbola. The Water Dragon would set its anchor on the outskirts, and a smaller vessel from the Trade Association would come and pick us up.

"Until we meet again!"

"Yeah!"

“Woof!”

From the deck of the merchant vessel, Fran waved goodbye to Miriam.

Miriam, the second princess of Seedrun, had no time for leisure. As captain of the Water Dragon, she needed to return to her homeland immediately.

The revolution was still burning in her people's minds, and the state was still unstable. There was no time for detours. Fult and Satya, prince and princess of Phyllius, joined Fran to see Miriam off.

Fran, who didn't want to say goodbye to her new friend, looked gloomy on the top deck of the ship.

It's not like this is our last goodbye. We'll see her again someday.

Hm...

Despite my best efforts, Fran only gave a dismissive nod.

Oh, look at you. Do you really want her to see you mope like this? Smile. It'll make Miriam feel better, I promise.

“Hm... Bye-bye, Miriam!”

“Indeed! Bye-bye, Fran!”

There you go.

Even a forced smile could chase away a bad mood.

The Water Dragon turned and sped off into the distance. Soon, it was nothing more than a speck.

“We should go into Bulbola.”

At Rengill's command, the merchant ship made its way towards land. It wasn't long before we made port at Bulbola.

We walked down the ramp, and it was time to say goodbye to Fult and Satya.

“You’ve done a great deal for us, Fran.”

“Thank you so much for everything.”

“Hm.”

This time, Fran wasn’t particularly bothered by the parting. It wasn’t that she didn’t care, just that their next meeting had already been decided.

“Well, we must go to the Count’s mansion,” said Fult.

“Promise me you’ll come find us when you’re finished with your errands,” Satya added. “The mansion is in the center of the noble district. You can’t miss it.”

“We’ll tell the Count all about you, Fran.”

Fran nodded. “All right.”

Initially, she’d refused their offer to stay at the Count’s mansion. Fran wasn’t refined enough to deal with members of high society, and there was Jet to worry about. Still, she couldn’t refuse when the chamberlain asked her personally.

Sellid took a liking to her after the episode at Seedrun. I suppose it was inevitable, given that she saved his life. Of course, the old chamberlain accompanied the invitation with one of his usual backhanded comments, saying “It does Their Highnesses no good to associate with you, but I suppose they have taken a liking.” This was typical. Sellid had played the role of cranky chamberlain for so long that I didn’t think he could speak like a normal person anymore.

“We’ll be seeing you.”

“Do take care of yourself.”

“You take care too, Jet.”

“Woof!”

The prince and his entourage got into a carriage prepared by the Lucille Trade Association. Once we'd seen them off, Rengill came to speak to Fran.

"We've finally arrived."

"Thanks for everything, Rengill."

"Oh, please. I've done nothing."

Fran, the little adventurer, was growing friendly with Rengill, a member of a great merchant association. They'd not known each other for very long, but they faced death together in the Seedrunian revolution. Back then, Rengill had felt inadequate for letting Fran do all the fighting. He held Fran's hand and bowed his head.

"Without your help, none of us would be in Bulbola. On behalf of myself and my crew, I thank you. Nothing we can do could ever repay you, but if you need anything, do not hesitate to call on the Lucille Trade Association. We shall do everything we can."

"All right."

I had every intention of asking for help the first chance we got. The trade association was very influential.

Fran shook Rengill's hand and left the harbor.

We're going to need to stop by the local Adventurers' Guild.

After everything that had happened, we still needed to turn in our completed security job. The circumstances were iffy, but the Phyllians didn't seem to mind. Fult sent one of his attendants to the guild as soon as we made port. All we needed to do was claim the reward.

"We also need to sell our monster materials."

Right.

We had collected a decent amount on the way here. It would be good to offload them.

“I want to check out the town, too.”

Bulbola was a huge city. There were lots of places to see.

“Woof, woof, woof.”

“You wanna walk around town too, Jet?”

“Woof!”

Jet was all for it. I wanted to check out the town as well, so a walk was the first order of business for this dog.

Let's see what Bulbola has in store.

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

We could look for the Adventurers' Guild as we walked. Two birds with one stone.

Bulbola. Granzell's Maritime Melting Pot and its second biggest city. The gigantic harbor could famously hold a hundred vessels, and over twenty countries traded within its walls. People said there was nothing you couldn't buy here.

It was bustling and prosperous beyond our wildest dreams. The road to the city district was as packed as a Japanese train station. The buildings were large, too. Even the local guard office was four stories high. Alessa was the first town I saw when I came to this world, and the guard station at Bulbola was at least ten times the size of the one in Alessa.

The city must need that many soldiers to ensure its smooth operation. Its scale and population were on a whole other level.

Wow, there are so many shops here. I don't know which ones to visit.

"Amazing."

"Woof."

Stalls lined both sides of the main street, and the sight made Fran and Jet's eyes sparkle with wonder. Mine too, of course. The stalls sold a myriad of food and souvenirs, and the main road had everything from popular shops with people lining up outside, to seedy-looking places selling contraband.

Being a melting pot, the foods came from all over the world. I saw a stall selling something that looked like Japanese oden. Naturally, there were western-type food stalls as well.

"Whoooa."

"Aroo."

Fran and Jet looked at them with gluttonous eyes. We had money, so I told them to eat whatever they liked.

I soon realized the error of my ways.

"So good."

"Arf!"

"That one, too."

"Woof, woof."

"Munch, munch."

"Urf."

It was actually easier to account for the time they weren't stuffing food down their throats.

Fran and Jet were quite a sight to behold: a small girl holding an inordinate amount of food and her big black dog continuously munching on something. Fran even got a

round of applause for gobbling a large shish kebab in one bite.

While they ate everything in sight, we came upon a large square. It was huge, at least two hundred meters in diameter, and the buildings around it were appropriately massive and gorgeous. It reminded me of Marunouchi or Times Square.

As I gazed at the buildings, one of the signs caught my eye.

That's...

What is it, Teacher?

That building over there.

I'd happened upon the banner of the Chefs' Guild: a fork and knife crossed over each other.

Never seen that before.

What kind of guild was it?

"Do you want to check it out?"

Please.

There were other big guilds here, like the Blacksmith's and the Merchant's. I even saw the sign for an embassy. The Chefs' Guild must be reputable if it could stand side by side with these giants.

"Here?"

Yeah. Although, it doesn't look like Jet can go in...

The sign on the door said: "No pets or familiars allowed." Understandable, since they worked with food.

What if he stayed in the shadows?

That should be fine. Jet, no coming out while we're inside, okay?

"Arf..."

Jet let out a dejected whine before retreating to the shadows. He'd expected to be fed well here.

"Excuse me."

The lobby was luxurious and looked a lot like the Adventurers' Guild back in Alessa. The wooden floors and the reception area were exactly alike. However, there was carpet on the floors here, and a chandelier hung from the ceiling, giving this guild a much grander feel.

I guess guilds are all built to similar specifications.

The main difference was the people here were not adventurers, but cooks and merchants. As we looked around the lobby, the receptionist called out to Fran.

"Hello, little girl. May I help you?"

"Not really, no."

"Um...?"

She was completely flabbergasted by Fran's brazen honesty.

"I've never seen a Chefs' Guild before."

"Aah, I see. I suppose you don't see much of us in other cities. Bulbola is called the cook's paradise! There are so many foodstuffs and ingredients flowing in from other countries that it eventually became necessary to establish the Chefs' Guild."

The receptionist patiently explained everything to Fran, the way she would to a child. I expected no less from the face of an established guild. This place was home to chefs, merchants, and anyone else involved in the food industry. Membership was initially limited to chefs, but now initiates were allowed in too, along with anyone with a healthy curiosity about recipes.

"That sounds great."

Fran didn't do much cooking, but she *did* appreciate a delicious meal. She nodded, approving of a guild that existed to help the cooks whose food she devoured.

The receptionist mistook Fran's interest for something else.

"Are you a cook yourself, young lady?"

"Maybe?"

"O-oh..."

Fran did no cooking despite her Level 10 Cooking skill.

"But my teacher is a master chef," she continued, sensing the receptionist's confusion.

"I-I see."

"His cooking is the best."

"Is he a member of this guild?"

"No."

"Would he like to be a member then? If he performs well, he will have access to exclusive ingredients and the ability to trade recipes. And there are many other benefits. We would love to have him on board."

Special benefits, you say? Now I was interested. I wondered if Fran was allowed membership, as well. She was already in the Adventurers' Guild, so I was worried that would be a problem.

"Oh, that's perfectly fine. In fact, most of our members have dual membership," the receptionist said plainly. "We have fewer prospective members than the Adventurers' Guild. No one would sign up with us if they only had to choose one. Think of us as a casual guild you can devote time to on the side. We were founded as a support group for cooks, after all."

"Then I'd like to sign up."

“Do you have a Bulbolan trade license?”

“Uh, no.”

“Then I will register you as a cook.”

I guessed the membership categories were separated into cook and merchant.

“That’ll work.”

“Cooks are required to take the entrance exam, however. Will that be all right?”

We would gain the convenience of buying ingredients from the guild, so I guess it was a small price to pay.

“Exam? What kind?”

“One of our judges will taste your cooking and, if you pass, you get signed up. We have a prep kitchen solely for examination purposes, or you could bring your dish in with you if that’s more your flavor.”

Would Fran be able to sign me up, then? I would love to be a member.

“Yes. All you need to be a member of the Chefs’ Guild is your name and the Guild Card.”

I thought the guild would be more exacting about this kind of thing. I guess the receptionist lady wasn’t kidding when she said this was casual. The guild card also doubled as a membership card and a points card.

“Can I just give you the dishes I have on hand now?”

“I suppose...”

For the umpteenth time today, the receptionist had a puzzled look on her face. Fran didn’t look like she had any dishes on her, so the receptionist was surprised that she wanted to present her food immediately.

“I’ll go with this and this.”

"Huh? Oh, is that an item bag?"

"Here."

Fran took out some curry and skewered boar. The - fragrant aroma of spices filled the lobby and attracted the attention of the chefs. I would be judged on my curry, and Fran on her skewers. She had actually cooked the boar skewers herself too, so it wasn't cheating.

"Ah. Wait a moment, please. I'll go get the judge."

"You're not judging these?"

"Oh, no. One of our top managers will do the judging."

After having two plates of food shoved in her face, the flustered receptionist left in a hurry. As we waited for her to return, I asked Fran about something that was bugging me.

I know it's an entrance exam and all, but are you sure you want to use some of your curry for it?

She hated it when she had to share her favorite dish. What had gotten into her today?

Your cooking's going to be tested, Teacher. We can't - present anything that's less than perfect. Your curry's going to knock the socks off that judge, Fran said, nostrils flaring.

O-oh. Thanks for your vote of confidence, Fran.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Right this way." The receptionists called for us five minutes later, and we followed her to a grand dining room. The table was adorned with a beautiful cloth, and the furniture looked exquisite.

"So, you're the new chef."

"Hm."

An old man with sharp eyes was waiting for us. He looked like a gourmet stickler or like one of those food critics who never gave anything a good rating. Now I was nervous.

"Meckam, here is what you will be judging today." The receptionist presented the two dishes to the old man.

"There's two?"

"This one's mine."

"A skewer... all right, let's have a taste."

Meckam took the boar skewer and examined it. He sniffed it for the aroma before putting the skewer in his mouth. He chewed slowly to savor and examine the flavor.

His lack of expression scared me. The taste test only took seconds, but it felt like minutes.

"Hm. That was all right," he said after finishing Fran's skewer.

"Can't help it."

Fran knew the limits of her cooking and had no reason to be upset. The skewers were a snack she'd made on a whim after getting her Cooking skill.

"But it wasn't bad, by any means. Your dish showed an amount of skill. It showcased your desire to make good food under less than ideal circumstances."

Well, then. The old man knew his stuff. Fran did try her best when she made those skewers. Yes, she'd cooked them without preparation, but she'd put her back into it, the way she always did when the chips were down.

The skewers themselves were grilled for thirty minutes using a combination of magic and technique. We used ingredients and seasoning you could find anywhere, but I still think they came out delicious. Unfortunately, Fran lost all interest in cooking when she realized that it took time. The examiner's insight into Fran's psyche was terrifying, considering all he had to work with was one skewer.

"You pass."

“Hm.”

Good. If the examiner thought Fran’s boar skewers worthy of admission, then he should have no problems with my curry. Actually, what was the point of me being a member of the Chefs’ Guild? We could just piggyback Fran’s membership, since she was already in.

No.

Fran insisted that we continued with the examination.

Why?

I want to shock him with your cooking.

She didn’t care about membership. Fran only wanted to show the snobby old man the deliciousness that was curry. She confidently shoved the plate in front of him.

“This one next.”

“Interesting. It looks like an Azelian dish but with a richer aroma. High-quality ingredients must’ve gone into making this.”

“It’s called curry. Teacher made it.”

“An original invention of your master?”

“Yeah. This is the ultimate dish. It took blood, sweat, and tears to create.”

No, Fran! No! Curry is a dish you can find on any old street corner back on Earth! It is a simple dish to make as long as you have the right spices!

“Well, I’m looking forward to this.”

“Curry is the greatest food in the world.”

“I hope it is.”

The old gourmet took a spoonful of curry—the dish Fran had exaggerated beyond salvation—and examined it just as

he had with Fran's skewers. He inhaled before putting it in his mouth.

"Oh?"

"Is it good?"

"Hmm."

"What do you think? You just had the pinnacle of cuisine."

Fran helped herself to some curry too, unable to hold back her appetite. She nodded along with the old gourmet, looking very satisfied. Meckam's nodding made her think that victory was hers, but the old man had other plans.

"It isn't bad." But upon finishing his curry, Meckam had a dissatisfied look. "But was that all? I think it is a little too soon to call this the pinnacle of all cooking."

As soon as the old man finished his sentence—

"What the hell did you just say?"

Fran became full of wrath at such blasphemy. She turned her murderous intent on the old gourmet, a fury that was usually reserved for combat.

Fran, what are you doing?!

"Curry is the most delicious thing in the world."

Wait! Stop! Oh God, she's already using Intimidate! You're going to knock him unconscious, Fran! Although considering his age, he might have a heart attack and die... Is the old man okay?

"It is delicious, yes. But I cannot call it the most delicious dish in the world."

Oh, wow. The old man was perfectly fine. He hadn't even broken a sweat! His nerves were steeled by years of food criticism. I expected nothing less from a master.

Fran, calm down! You can't fly into a rage over curry!

Still, the anger in Fran's thoughts remained.

I am calm!

You are not. Let's just hear him out! Okay? Maybe he has a valid reason. Just please take your hand off my hilt!

Curry wasn't just Fran's favorite food, it was a dish that her teacher once made only for her. A dish which brought joy to her friends. Most of all, it had been her first meal when she was freed from a life of slavery. I might be exaggerating, but curry was a monumental dish for her.

I didn't think she'd get so angry over it, though.

"I'll hear you out."

"As far as the flavor goes," Meckam explained, remaining unfazed. "It is quite well rounded, despite having some room for improvement. I must also concede that I've never tasted anything quite like it."

"Hm!"

Fran nodded in agreement, and then tilted her head in confusion as he went on.

"But I cannot feel the dignity of a chef in this dish!"

"Dignity?"

"Call it pride, self-respect, honor, whatever you want. It is something that every chef must have. It is a vital, though unseen, ingredient in every dish. But I cannot sense that here. This curry was properly cooked, but it is only home cooking."

Well, yeah, of course. I wanted Fran to eat something nice, but the whole point of one-pot cooking was to make a huge batch of something for future meals. I was careful not to mess up but never thought I was going to redefine the very essence of cooking itself. I cooked it with the mindset of

someone who had a maxed-out Cooking skill and wanted something nice to eat.

But this old man was something else. Nothing escaped his palate. Fran took him for an enemy, but I didn't really hate him. In fact, I was kind of touched to meet a character right out of my old cooking manga.

"So long as a dish lacks the dignity of a chef, I cannot consider it to be the best in the world!"

"Gununu."

I'd never heard someone actually say 'Gununu' before.

"Still, your teacher passes the test. As such, he is now a member of the guild, not that I expect much from him."

"We'll show you."

"Show me what?"

"Curry is the pinnacle of cuisine! We'll show you next time!"

"Interesting. However, I am a busy man. 'Next time' might be a long way away."

"Urgh..."

Look, I already passed. Isn't that enough?

No!

Fran refused my attempt to placate her.

The guy said he was busy.

Curry is the best food there is! I'm not backing down!

She certainly didn't sound like she was going to concede.

"When's the next time we can meet?"

"Let's see... If you must have me sample your curry, you could participate in this event."

“...?”

Meckam gave Fran a flyer for a cooking contest sponsored by the Bulbulan Chefs' Guild. The preliminaries would be conducted through a simple food presentation, the semi-finals through a food stall contest, and the finals were a gourmet cook-off.

“We are in the preliminary stage of the contest. Your curry is delicious and unique enough to make it to the semi-finals. If you win, I will taste your curry once more. I am one of the judges, you see.”

“You’re on!”

F-Fran?! You can’t just make a decision on the spot like that!

I was going to have to make more curry. Not to mention the food stall contest. I couldn’t imagine Fran manning the booth. I would certainly have to show up if we made it to the finals. Would Fran cook in my stead? I didn’t think we could trick the old man either way.

She would regret committing to this on a whim. Still, Fran was adamant.

We are participating.

We’re going up against professional chefs. We might not even make it to the finals.

Don’t worry, she said. I know you’ll win.

I’m glad that you think so highly of me, but still.

My chances of making it to the finals were low. We would be competing against seasoned chefs who had been cooking for decades.

This is one battle we can’t afford to lose. We can’t let him look down on curry like that.

Yeah, but...

Honestly, I didn't think we could win.

It's okay, Teacher. I believe in you.

Well, I don't. My Cooking skill aside, I'm practically a beginner.

You don't trust my taste?

Of course I do, but...

Fran loved to eat, and she hated empty flattery. Her Cooking skill was at Level 10, too. If she said my food was good, then it had to be good. I just didn't think it was the pinnacle of cooking.

Then believe in me who believes in you.

Fran...!

"Believe in me who believes in you," ranked third on my Top Ten List of Cool Lines. I'd always wanted to say it, and for Fran to fit it in so casually! This girl really was special.

Damn it. When you put it that way, I am forced to comply...!

Then can we join?

Oh...sure.

In the end, I agreed.

Yeah. Let's do this. And let's win while we're at it.

Yeah!

It was rare for Fran to be so set on something. I wanted to indulge her for once.

"What's wrong? Are you running scared?"

"Hmph. I was just getting into it. Our curry's going to win this contest."

I guess that settled our entry.

“Then you will be taking part?”

“Hm!”

“Have a look through these registration papers and sign on the dotted line.” Meckam called one of the administrators to provide an explanation.

There were over one thousand participants in the preliminaries. That number would be culled to a mere twenty by the time the semi-finals rolled around. I almost felt bad for being allowed in so easily.

The semi-finals involved manning a three-day food stall. Contestants opened their stalls, and the winner was decided by how much profit they made. We would receive 100,000G to cover the costs, which drove home how big this contest was. We were provided with a set of ingredients and were also allowed to use our own as long as we informed the Chefs’ Guild beforehand. Rare ingredients were a staple in this phase, and 100,000G would not be enough to cover the costs.

However, the price of your ingredients was deducted from your total profit, which meant going all-out in this stage might cost you the win. We were going for final profit here, not revenue.

The top four contestants would go on to the final, where they would present their best dish on a silver platter. The winner got 100,000G. The prize money wasn’t worth much, but the honor of winning was more than worth the effort. It virtually guaranteed that a chef’s restaurant would be world famous. Some of the winners even went on to cook for the royal family.

“The semi-finals will take place in three days. The finals are on the seventh of April.”

The Festival of the Moons was tomorrow, March 31st, and would go on for an entire week. That meant the finals

would be held on the last day.

“Is that enough time for you to prepare?”

Fran tilted her head. She couldn’t know the answer, after all.

Teacher?

We’d decided to participate. Making it work was my job.

Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.

“Hm. We’re good.”

“Very well. Here is your funding. Don’t run away with it, now.”

Meckam gave us a pouch full of money. He did it so casually that it made me wonder whether he was even worried about us disappearing. Then again, the old man had proven himself to be an excellent judge of character, and I supposed that he trusted his own judgment.

“Of course. You better hold on to your socks.”

“Hmph. I look forward to tasting your dish again.”

“Hm!”

And just like that, we’d somehow entered a cooking contest.

The Chefs’ Guild offered the use of their facilities, but I wasn’t going to cook in public where everyone could see. We were going to have to cook somewhere hidden. I needed to think of what kind of curry I was going to make, too. And then there was the problem of ingredients and spices. We still had to check-in at the Adventurers’ Guild, and we couldn’t forget the Festival of the Moons.

I might have gotten a little too ahead of myself. I wondered if we could make it in time...

Thirty minutes had passed since we entered the cooking contest.

The Chefs' Guild people told us it should be just ahead...

Now we were looking for the Adventurers' Guild. I had wanted to look around town a bit more, but we were short on time. We needed to finish our errands so we could get to contest prep.

We'll sell our materials, buy some spices, and get cooking where no one can see.

"Hm."

We walked until we happened upon a large building. The receptionist at the Chefs' Guild told us that we couldn't miss it, and now I knew why.

"Is that the guild?"

Looks like it... It's huge!

"Big."

"Woof."

The guild in Alessa was pretty big, but the one in Bulbola was on another level. It looked more like a noble's mansion. The guild was surrounded by other trade houses, but none of them compared to the majesty of the guildhouse.

"Is that a castle?"

Sure looks like one.

The sign above the gigantic door confirmed that we were at the right place. However, upon entering, the level of luxury dropped significantly. Still fancy but not overwhelming.

The guildhouse was actually kind of cruddy compared to its exterior. Definitely not as extravagant as the Chefs'

Guild. Then again, adventurers were a rowdy bunch. Some of them were even outlaws and wouldn't think twice about stealing or breaking the furniture.

That said, the layout was still impeccable. There were nine counters in total and about fifty adventurers loitering in the lobby. I thought there might be something major going on, but this seemed like just another day in Bulbola's Adventurers' Guild.

The receptionists were equally impressive. A beautiful lady graced each counter. One such lady, stationed near the entrance, was the first to address Fran.

"Welcome. Is this your first time at the guild?"

This was the general reception, I assumed.

"Hm."

"Would you like a brief explanation of the guild at Bulbola?"

"Please."

"Very well. This is the general reception counter. Please report here if you wish to use the guildhouse facilities."

The guildhouse had a magical device that could broadcast announcements inside its walls. The three counters next to it were quest counters, and the three further inside were for trade. There were even counters specifically for clients and consultation.

The upper floors contained a library and a workshop for craftsmen. On top of that, there were lodging facilities and a training area for beginners. The guildhouses we'd been to before hadn't had emergency lodging, so that was new. It was appropriately cramped and uncomfortable, and usually reserved for adventurers who'd failed their latest mission or were in dire straits financially.

"I see. So that's why this place is so big."

“How may we be of service to you today?”

“Hm. I’d like to sell some materials.”

“Do you have your Adventurer’s Card with you?” The receptionist asked for it without batting an eye. She was just as well trained as the Chefs’ Guild receptionist before her. Such was the level of service these large associations provided.

“Here.”

“Let me just run this through the system.”

But how would she react now? Could she remain calm and professional after seeing Fran was a D-Rank adv—

“Fran. D-Rank Adventurer. Please make your way to Counter Six.”

“Hm.”

Now that was professionalism! The receptionist showed Fran where to go without so much as a change in expression. I think this was the first time we’d gotten such a reception. Usually, the receptionist would go, “Wait, D-Rank?” followed by, “This little girl?”

The girl at the trading counter was the same. She just took a look at Fran’s card and went about her job. They were a little too calm, in fact. I’d gotten so accustomed to surprising the locals that I felt something was missing.

Still, the adventurers made up for what the receptionists lacked. Murmurs started spreading as soon as Fran took out the gigantic Fleet Breaker Tuna.

“What the hell?! Is that a Fleet Breaker?! ”

“S-she probably found that lying around somewhere.”

“R-right? There’s no way that little girl could’ve hunted that thing.”

They couldn't believe their eyes. Not that I blamed them.

The monster materials we gathered during our voyage totaled about 200,000G. Most of them were cheap, but the horn of the Fleet Breaker Tuna proved to be of great value—mainly because it could be used to craft spears and other such weapons. We were asked to sell the meat and bones of the Fleet Breaker, but we declined. Fran had developed a taste for the meat, and I wanted the bones to make broth. Along with the reward money from our escort gig, we got 500,000G to add to our cooking contest war chest.

A man approached us as Fran was collecting her money. He was an adventurer by the looks of it: short black hair and a tough look on his face. His brown garments emphasized maneuverability over protection, and he wore a heavy cloak made from some kind of monster hide. His crimson bandana looked like it was made of the same stuff. He was tall and slender but not malnourished. On the contrary, he was lean and ripped, without unnecessary weight.

I thought he was next in line for the trading counter, but the man's eyes were set on Fran. I gave him the usual welcome Identify.

Name: Colbert

Race: Human

Class: Steel Fist

Level: 41/99

HP: 228; Magic: 152; Strength: 249; Agility: 203

Skills: Disassemble 4; Martial Arts 6; Martial Arts Mastery 6; Danger Sense 3; Advanced Punch Mastery 2; Punch Arts 9; Punch Mastery 10; Breath Control 4; Toughness 6; Blink 7; Swim 4;

**Ocean Resistance 2; Throw 4; Everyday Magic 3;
Sleep Resistance 3; Paralysis Resistance 4;
Cooking 3; Hawkeye; Beast Killer; Spirit Manipulation**

Class Skill: Steel Fist

Titles: Bear Killer; Tiger Killer

Equipment: Water Dragon Leather Gloves; Aged Water Tiger Gi; Aged Water Tiger Shoes; Red Maw Bear Bandanna; Red Maw Bear Cloak; Bracelet of Pain Resistance; Bracelet of Physical Resistance

He was strong. Definitely stronger than a C-Rank. He was comparable to Jean, the Necromancer, and stronger than Alessa's Ogre instructor.

I thought he was unarmed but soon realized he was a martial artist who specialized in unarmed combat. Breath Control was also quite interesting. With it, he could focus his energy into one particular area of his body and strengthen it. Properly utilized, it could be used to block sharp objects. The skill was versatile and could be used for both offense and defense.

His Class Skill, Steel Fist, also attracted my attention. It was certainly appropriate for a martial artist. His skill tree suggested that he beat up monsters with his bare hands. I really wanted to see that for myself. If we were lucky, he might fling a monster into the sky with a single blow, like in my manga back home.

“Hello there, little lady. Did you hunt that thing down yourself?”

His choice of words made it seem like he was making fun of Fran, but his expression held no sign of contempt. He really wanted to know.

“Hm. I fished it.”

“Fished it, you say?”

“Yeah. On a boat.”

“That’s amazing! Folks usually use magic to hunt these suckers down.”

He took Fran at her word. And here I thought we’d have to spend a few more minutes explaining.

“You believe me?”

“What? Of course I do. I have eyes, you know. I can tell how strong you are from the way you carry yourself.”

He’d figured out her strength and had no reason to doubt her. I diverted my attention to the other adventurers, those whose eyes were not as keen as Colbert’s.

“Fleet Breaker Tuna just happen to be one of my favorites. They’re so hard to come by, though. Say, you wouldn’t mind selling me some of its meat, would you? I’m sure it still has a lot of flesh left if you fished it by hand.”

He wanted a share. The monster fish was over ten - meters long. There would be more than enough left even if we sold some, but Fran shook her head.

“Has someone else taken claim of it?” he asked.

He couldn’t imagine anyone eating an entire Fleet Breaker.

“Kind of? I’m eating it.”

Unfortunately, Fran was not your average anyone. Besides, we could keep the Fleet Breaker fresh indefinitely in our Pocket Dimension. Fran had taken a liking to sushi, and I found it hard to imagine that she’d be willing to part with her prize.

“Seriously? This entire thing?”

“Hm.”

"I see... Aaah, that's a shame..."

His shoulders slumped in disappointment. He must've really wanted some.

I felt sorry for him but also recognized that this was a chance to earn a favor from a powerful martial artist. Perhaps we should give him a piece. Before I could voice my suggestion, Fran took something out of her pocket and gave it to him.

"Here. It's a tuna sushi."

She presented the sushi we'd made on the ship. It was ready to eat: brushed with shoyu on a small wooden plate.

I thought you liked sushi. Are you sure?

Can't be helped. I have to start marketing.

Marketing? I wondered, as Fran continued the conversation.

"Did you make this yourself?"

"My teacher made it."

That wasn't exactly true. I'd borrowed Fran's body to prepare the sushi, so it was more Fran's creation than mine.

The man looked at the dish with great curiosity. "Sushi, you say? Raw fish on top of rice? I've never seen this before."

"Hm."

Colbert took the sushi carefully from the plate. He sniffed it and immediately knew the fish was still good. Taking advantage of this spark of courage, he scooped the entire thing into his mouth. Fran joined him by stuffing her cheeks with sushi; she couldn't help herself any longer. In fact, she ate three pieces all at once.

The man quietly chewed his food, making sure to savor the flavor. Suddenly, his expression shifted to shock. I guess

he didn't like it, after all.

"This is delicious! Exquisite! How can such flavor come from rice and a piece of raw fish? The knife handling must've been brilliant! You used an impeccably sharp blade to cut the Fleet Breaker, preserving its body heat and the integrity of its muscle fibers. And this is no ordinary rice. You've added vinegar to help it hold its shape and give it a subtle tang. Tuna and rice melt in your mouth in perfect harmony... This is excellent cooking! Sushi, you say? Despite its outward simplicity, this dish requires perfect preparation! Amazing!"

Wow, he got real talkative all at once. He did have the Cooking skill, so I thought he was a hobbyist, but the way he talked reminded me of Meckam... Was the average Bulbolan like this? I wasn't sure whether to be worried or impressed.

"And your teacher made this, young lady?"

"Hm."

"A supreme chef... Where, might I ask, is his establishment?"

The guy called me supreme and was now being uncomfortably polite.

"Nowhere."

"Then perhaps he is employed in a respectable eatery?"

"Nope."

"Then how am I supposed to feast upon more of your master's delicacies?!"

The man, now nearly frenzied, drew closer to Fran. To an onlooker, his questioning would have seemed more like an interrogation. He really wanted to know where he could get more sushi.

“We’ll be running a food stall in the contest.”

“So you got through the preliminaries! I suppose that was a given with such expert hands. I’ll see you then! I’ll come visit every day! What will you serve for the contest?”

“Curry.”

“Never heard of it. Is it another of your teacher’s original creations?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Aah, I can’t wait to see what it tastes like!”

That was what Fran wanted. Colbert was a high-rank adventurer, and more people would come if he recommended us. Fran was quite shrewd.

“The name’s Colbert. B-Rank Adventurer. They call me Steelclaw Colbert.”

“Steelclaw?”

“It’s my nickname. I’m not as famous as Amanda the Hariti, Hundred Blade Forlund, or Slaughterhouse Jean du Vix, but I hope to be famous throughout the continent one day.”

Nicknames, huh? Then again, I guess some people *had* taken to calling Fran the Swordceress.

Amanda the Hariti made sense, considering how protective she was of the children, but Slaughterhouse Jean? That was disturbing. I couldn’t imagine our obnoxious necromancer inventing such a name for himself. I guess he wasn’t just some weirdo no one knew of, after all.

“I’m Fran. D-Rank Adventurer.”

“D-Rank, huh? I can see quite the future in store for you. Hell, you’ve already changed my life with your master’s sushi. Thanks again, by the way.”

This guy sure loved to exaggerate. Then again, I sensed no ill will.

"You've got quite the tongue to understand the tastiness of sushi with one bite."

"Why thank you. Considering your master's skills, you must be quite the chef yourself, Fran."

They'd somehow managed to hit it off. Fran and Colbert were smiling like two boys at the end of a fistfight. They'd attracted an even bigger crowd by the time they shook hands.

I felt someone else coming our way. A short and stout man with a fluffy white beard approached us. He was probably the same height as Fran, his muscles looked like boulders, and he was sporting a respectable beer gut. A dwarf, in short. Quite strong, too. There was no wasted effort when he moved. How had he approached us so quietly despite his bulk?

Judging by the reaction of the other adventurers, he must be quite well known.

"I could hear you a mile away, Colbert. Why all the excitement?"

"Oh, Guildmaster."

This dwarf was the GM of Bulbola.

"The Guildmaster is an A-Rank adventurer. They call him Dragon Hammer Gammod. Bulbola's finest."

A quick Identify confirmed his strength. He was definitely stronger than Colbert. He had Advanced Hammer Mastery and Land Magic in his skill list, making him ideal in both the front and back lines of a battle. He was even stronger than us, really. The Guildmaster title wasn't for show.

"You are quite well trained for your age, young lady... but I've never seen you around. The name's Gammod. I run the guild here."

I guess the Guildmaster knew all the regulars. Or maybe Fran just stood out to the point that he wouldn't forget her face.

"Hm. I'm Fran. D-Rank."

"Oh? I think I have heard of you. From the Black Cat who started her career in Alessa. Swordceress, was it? You really do have quite a fine sword, now that I'm looking at it."

Gammod immediately went for Fran's jugular. Much as I hated to toot my own horn, Fran did love me very much. She looked happy when he complimented me, although only Jet and I could tell.

"Hm. I have the best sword."

"Indeed you do! Will you be attending the Festival of the Moons?"

"Yeah. I'll be joining in with the cooking contest, too."

"Really?"

"My teacher's participating," Fran replied.

Colbert offered Gammod a piece of sushi. "Try it, GM."

"And what is it, exactly?"

"It's a dish Fran's master dreamed up. Just eat it, and you'll know what I'm talking about."

"A-all right." Gammod was a little wary as he put the sushi into his mouth. But his eyes widened, and he fell into silence. The guildmaster held his breath for several seconds.

"What is this?! It's delicious! It's refreshing while still bringing the flavor of the fish to the fore! By the gods, this would go great with a drink!"

It seemed all Bulbolans were passionate about food.

"You might actually win the contest with this! I'll be sure to pay you a visit!"

"Hm. Our store's called the Black Tail."

"Got it. I can't wait to see what you serve up!"

The other adventurers broke out into whispers at the Guildmaster's approval. "Black Tail? I think I'll check it out."

The GM couldn't have shown up at a better time.

Soon, Gammod's secretary arrived to drag him away despite his complaints. Nonetheless, we appreciated the free PR.

"Anyway, call me if you need any help. I may not look like much, but there are some strings that I can pull. I don't mind getting down and dirty. In fact, I'd be honored to help this teacher of yours."

Looks like I've got myself a fan.

We would probably take him up on his offer. He didn't seem like a bad guy, anyway.

Interestingly, each high-rank adventurer we'd met so far was different. I wondered if any of them could teach Fran an ounce of common sense. Then again, maybe I just hadn't gotten used to the common sense of this world yet.

We talked as we walked away from the Adventurers' Guild. We might be able to secure a prep kitchen and the necessary ingredients, but we needed to decide what to sell at our stall. We discussed our options as we walked towards the market. A hypothetical onlooker would see a girl mumbling to herself or just talking to her pet dog. Still, I doubted anyone could hear Fran over the bustle of the city.

I think we should discuss what to sell at our food stall.

“Curry.”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet both loved curry, after all.

All right, but what should we put in it? Also, how spicy should it be? We’re going to have to order the plates and cutlery, too.

Being the culinary capital of the world, Bulbola was teeming with general stores. The people in this world could mass produce paper plates and wooden spoons by using alchemy, keeping their costs low.

We’ll need some meat, too.

We didn’t have much raw meat left, having used up most of it. We’d need more from the market.

And then there’s the vegetables. We definitely need potatoes, carrots, and scallions. Then apples and honey for added flavor. Chocolate, too... Okay, now I’m worried whether we’ll have enough spices to make this thing.

There were a lot of ingredients from my world that you just couldn’t get here. We’d have to survey the market and see what we had to work with. I’d have to think about the subtle flavoring and consistency of the curry, too. Fran always liked her vegetables on the mushier side, and Jet had developed a liking for spice.

Let’s just go to the market. Be on the lookout for pig monster meat and vegetables.

“Okay.”

“Woof!”

An hour passed before we reached the port-side market. It was Granzell’s largest—or second largest—market,

boasting a cornucopia of products from every corner of the world. It was also fiercely competitive.

Still, we couldn't find the ingredients we needed. We managed to get the required vegetables and seasonings, but the meat and spices that would form the heart of our curry were still missing.

The butchers here don't sell enough monster meat.

In fact, monster materials were hard to come by in general. When we finally found the monster pork we were looking for, there wasn't enough to go around. And while not obscenely expensive, it was too pricey to waste in a big stewing pot.

Maybe we could just use regular pork. Curry was a unique cuisine in this world. Perhaps we could win by sheer novelty.

At least we were fine for vegetables. A lot of grocers sold what we needed, and they had plenty in stock for a food contest. We secured apples, honey, chocolate, and even coffee for depth of flavor.

“Munch, munch.”

“Arf, scarf.”

You two sure look like you're enjoying yourselves.

Fran ate everything we came across as I fretted over the competition. She ate quite a lot on our way to the Chefs' Guild too, but showed no sign of slowing down.

“This is market research. I need to know what's trending right now.”

“Woof.”

If you say so.

At least I could eavesdrop more easily since Fran stopped by every food stall we came across.

Market research, huh? You know, I think it's time we gathered intel on our rivals.

“Intel?”

Yeah. We should start by visiting the restaurants of - previous winners and runner-ups.

Bulbola was crawling with master chefs. Surely we could sample some of their cooking.

Fran nodded sternly at my suggestion. “All right. I’ll sniff out every last one of those master chefs!”

That’s nice, Fran, but you’re drooling.

“Woof, woof!” Jet barked and wagged his tail happily, but it might be too soon for celebration. We didn’t know if he’d even be allowed in. I hoped he wouldn’t be too disappointed.

We got the information we needed by simply asking around. I guess it helped that the people manning the food stalls had a soft spot for adorable catgirls. They answered all of Fran’s questions eagerly.

Our first stop was a restaurant close to the marketplace.

“Here?”

Looks like it. It says Dragonhead right on the sign.

The restaurant was right next to the market. Dragonhead had won last year’s contest, but it didn’t look too high class. The food was affordable, too.

Is this really the place?

“Is it open?” Fran peeked in through the door. It was a relaxed-looking establishment, and there were still some empty seats.

“Welcome. Table for one?”

“Hm. Plus one dog.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We don’t allow pets here,” the waitress explained.

Well, I kind of figured that would be the case.

“But, Jet...”

“Arf...”

Give it up, buddy. Just go into the shadows for a while.

Jet whined. The nerve of this wolf, trying to pull off puppy eyes! I’d have to make it up to him later.

“For one, then.”

“D-did your dog just go into your shadow...?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“R-right. Of course he didn’t. Dogs can’t hide in shadows. It doesn’t make sense. I must be tired.”

Sorry, lady. We promise to order lots to make it up to you.

Fran flipped through the menu as soon as she sat down. There were too many dishes to choose from, so we had to play our trump card.

“What do you recommend?”

That should cover it.

“Well, definitely our specialty item, Dragon Bone Soup.”

“Dragon Bone? You make broth out of dragon bones?”

“Yes. It’s our best seller.”

Dragon bone. I couldn’t imagine what it tasted like. What I *did* know was that dragon meat was as delicious as it was expensive. We’d found a store that carried low-grade dragon meat, and it was easily a hundred times more

expensive than monster pork. Dragon bone must be a highly-valued ingredient, as well.

“One of those, then. Also one of these, and this, and this one, and this one right here.”

“A-are you sure? Our servings are quite generous.”

Fran only nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Each portion has enough to feed one person.”

“No problem.”

“I-I see... I’ll prepare for some of the dishes for takeaway.”

“Hm?”

“Let me just repeat your order: one Dragon Bone Soup, one Storm Falcon Steak, one Swamp Pork Skewer, one Ygg Potato Salad, and a Bulbolan Crab Pilaf.”

“Hm.”

This was a regular breakfast by Fran’s standards. The waitress would be wasting time preparing some of the dishes for takeaway, and for that I apologized.

The soup came first after a ten minute wait. It was a clear, yellow broth with nothing in it. At a glance, it looked like consommé. I saved half of it to examine later before Fran gulped it all down.

“Can I eat now?”

Go for it.

“Let’s dig in.”

Fran slurped the Dragon Bone Soup.

How is it?

“It’s...good,” Fran said with mild vexation.

I had no idea why she would be upset by good food.

"It might be better than your consommé."

I see.

That was a surprise. Saying that something was better than my cooking was the highest praise that you could get. And for only 20G a bowl. It was ridiculous.

My consommé was specially-made from monster bones and meat—both of which fetched high prices, judging by our stroll through the market. If we were to use those ingredients, I'd have to price my consommé at 50G. Fran said Dragon Bone Soup was better than that, *and* it cost only 20G. It was crazy.

It was also cheaper than the other monster dishes, which averaged at 60G a portion. The soup bordered on being dirt cheap.

I might have underestimated our competition. I would have to work hard if we were to stand a chance.

We might end up placing last if we don't get serious.

Regular pork was no longer an option. We had to somehow get our hands on monster pork. We'd have to select our ingredients carefully too, and settle for nothing but the finest. We couldn't spend recklessly since we still had the profits to worry about, but we couldn't afford to be shy in our usage of spices, either.

And then there was the matter of presentation. We'd have to figure out a suitable way to sell our food. If we simply handed out plates of curry and rice, we wouldn't do well.

No helping it... We'll have to go there.

I was more than ready to use every lead we had. We left the Dragonhead and made our way to a certain building.

He said call him if we needed anything...but I didn't think we'd take him up on that right away.

The Lucille Trade Association—the merchant association Rengill was affiliated with. To think we had only parted ways a few hours ago and were now standing in front of their headquarters.

The biggest trade association in Bulbola had an - appropriately massive building—at least twice as large as its rivals. It was opulent to the point that I felt out of place. Faced with all this grandeur, Fran brazenly decided to enter the building anyway.

The receptionists were all busy so, once inside, we talked to one of the apprentices near the door. He looked annoyed at being interrupted by a little girl but went to contact the captain immediately once she showed him Rengill's coin.

Captain Rengill was higher up in the ranks than I'd expected.

We sat on one of the lobby's sofas and waited.

Teacher...give me another skewer.

You still want to eat? Will you be fine for dinner?

Of course.

All right.

Nobles mixed with merchants in the lobby. And in the midst of them all, a small adventurer—a little girl, really—quietly sat on a couch and munched away at her skewers. Fran stood out like a sore thumb. I could say that people stared at her, but it felt like they were observing her with curiosity rather than contempt.

Not that anyone attempted to pick a fight. I guessed the people here were too civilized for that. Then again, maybe they were just afraid of Jet, sitting right next to her. And we'd had Colbert to thank for the lack of conflict at the Adventurers' Guild earlier.

Fran chewed on her skewers until Rengill eventually arrived.

"Welcome. I'm glad to see you so soon." Rengill smiled and offered his hand.

"Hm."

"Woof!"

"Ha ha ha, good to see you too, Jet."

It seemed the captain was famous here. The surrounding traders balked when they saw him extend his hand in gratitude.

Rengill guided us to his office. The plain-looking room was cozy and tastefully decorated, just like Rengill himself. He asked Fran to have a seat before getting down to business.

"So, what brings you here?"

"Hm. I'm going to take part in this."

"Oh my, the cooking contest? So you've passed the preliminaries?" Rengill barely glanced at the flyer. The contest was definitely famous here.

"Not me. Teacher."

"Teacher? Who are you talking about? Was he on the ship with you?"

"Hm. Teacher's elusive like that."

"Aah, then I suppose you've regrouped with him here."

That was the story we'd come up with. I was a wandering teacher who took Fran for an apprentice and set her loose on the world. It reflected poorly on my part, but I couldn't think of anything better.

"Teacher needs ingredients for the contest."

“Which is why you’ve come here. So, what will you compete with? The competition is tight every year.”

“Curry.”

“Curry? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Teacher’s original recipe. Here.” She took a plate of curry out of Pocket Dimension and set it on the table.

“Aah, so this is called curry.”

We’d passed it around back on the ship. Rengill may not have known its name, but he couldn’t forget the aroma. He took a deep whiff as he looked at the plate in front of him.

“If you’ll allow me.”

After his first bite, Rengill scooped one spoonful after another into his mouth, cleaning his plate.

“As delicious as it is rare and fragrant,” he declared, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “I thought this would sell well when I first had it. Why, even the recipe would fetch a high price!”

The merchant had passed his judgment, declaring curry as a product worth selling.

“Will you be competing in the food stall phase with this?”

Fran nodded. “Hm.”

The captain looked lost in thought. “I see...”

“Will there be a problem?”

“Arf?”

“Well, as delicious as curry is, it will be difficult to sell at a food stall.”

“Why? You just said it’s good.”

“It’ll take too long to prepare, you see.”

The previous finalists went for either skewers or soups, which could be prepared as soon as the customer placed the order. And more sales meant more profit.

Taking that into consideration, curry and rice was difficult to prepare. You needed to scoop the rice, pour the curry on top, and then give the customer their plate. It would take even longer if the customer wanted it to go.

I see. When he puts it that way, curry rice would place us at a disadvantage.

Should we forego the rice and sell it as a kind of soup? Then again, I didn't think we could beat Dragon Bone Soup that way.

Fran groaned. "How do we sell a lot of curry with no hassle...?"

"That's the million G question. It takes more than a tasty dish to win the food stall phase."

So much for curry rice, then. However, Fran seemed to be struck with inspiration.

"Oh! I have an idea! What if it went the other way around?"

"Other way around?"

"Yeah. Put the curry inside the rice. Like curry rice balls."

"Woof!"

The rice ball was another of Fran's favorites, since it was easy to eat and could be flavored with a variety of fillings. It was a good idea, and Jet drooled in silent agreement.

Curry rice balls were good, but the curry would seep through the rice, given enough time. For them to be any good, we'd have to pack the balls tight.

What if we deep fried them? Fran suggested.

Deep-fried curry rice balls?

The name didn't quite roll off the tongue, although it sounded delicious. But Fran's suggestion gave me an idea.

Fran, I just thought of something.

Deep-fried rice balls?

No, not that.

Our dish of choice should be something we could make in bulk for cheap. It would be portable and just as delicious at room temperature.

We're making curry bread!

Curry bread!

Woof, woof!

Fran and Jet's eyes sparkled. The mere mention of curry was enough encouragement for them. Fran got even more excited when I told her we could make a variety of flavors.



“Curry bread. That’ll work.”

“Curry bread?” said Captain Rengill, noticing Fran’s mutterings. His merchant eyes gleamed with curiosity.

“What’s that?”

“They’re curry-filled doughnuts.”

He nodded, able to imagine what they would taste like. “I see. Yes, that could work, actually. The aroma would attract nearby customers, and they could buy several at a time.”

“We can make different flavors, too.”

“Really?! So you won’t be limited to this particular curry?”

“Hm.”

“That sounds wonderful!”

All right. Curry bread was going to be our main product! Still, it wasn’t without its problems.

“We’ll need spices and flour. Can you get them for us?”

“Right... Will bread flour suffice?”

Teacher?

Yeah, that’ll be fine.

“Yes.”

“In that case!” There was tons of flour in storage, so that wasn’t a problem. “I’ll get your flour ready.”

“Please.”

“But the spices...” Rengill hesitated.

“No good?”

“It should be fine. Do you know which ones you need?”

“Hm.”

Fran told Rengill the spices we required.

"Good. However, there has been a spike in prices lately, so it's going to cost you."

It was the aftereffects of the Seedrun incident, he explained. The previous king imposed ridiculous taxes on most goods, which contributed to the steep increase in prices. Spices were among them. Fran had overthrown the Seedrunian tyrant, but it would take the current government time to get rid of all the unnecessary taxes. Rengill thought it might take a month for prices to restabilize.

"I don't want to take advantage of the person who saved my life, but I am still a merchant. Making a profit for the Lucille Trade Association remains my chief responsibility."

Fair enough. I respected Rengill all the more for that.

"I do have a suggestion, however."

"What is it?"

"Would you be willing to sell the recipe for curry rice to the trade association?"

Sell my recipe? Could he make money with it? According to Rengill, it wasn't such a rare occurrence. The recipes developed by the winners of the cooking contest always fetched a high price.

"We could pay you in cash or sell you spices at their base rate. Which would you prefer?"

I had no intention of opening up my own curry shop, so either option worked for me. Still, I doubted the recipe would be so highly valued. If Rengill was wrong, his position would be on the line, but the merchant captain sounded confident.

"This recipe will surely cover the principal cost. That much I know for certain."

I was flattered but also felt slightly guilty. I was just reproducing a common Earth recipe, after all.

In the end, I was in this for Fran, so we accepted his proposal.

“Hm. Okay, that works.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to consult your teacher? This is quite an important decision...”

“Teacher isn’t one to sweat the details. He also let me have full control over our participation in the tournament.”

“If you say so... I’ll prepare the documents for the spices and flour.”

“Thanks.”

Rengill handed us papers with a detailed list of the foodstuffs and their respective amounts.

“We won’t be able to give you the ingredients today, since we still need to prepare them, of course. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you. We’ll get them ready as soon as we can.”

Rengill rang the bell on his desk to summon a young beastman. One of the apprentice merchants, I guessed. Rengill gave him the signed documents and told him to prepare the goods.

“Are there other ingredients you need? We can get them ready for you while we’re at it.”

“Vegetables, I guess.”

“Such as?”

“Potatoes, onions, carrots. Oh, and some apples.”

“No problem. We’ll have them ready shortly. We always have plenty of those in stock, although we can’t provide any that are fresh from the harvest, of course.”

That couldn't be helped. I was thankful to be provided with all of these ingredients. We asked Rengill to source our ingredients from lands which were famous for them.

"We'll need some meat, too."

"We have beef, pork, chicken, lizard, and frog, just to name a few."

"Can you get your hands on some monster meat?"

We asked, expecting a flat no, which was kind of what we got. Monster meat was difficult to get a hold of. If nothing else, the Adventurers' Guild had dibs on most of it. They would then sell it directly to the Chefs' Guild and the marketplace, which meant the trade association didn't see much of it.

I figured that'd be the case. There wasn't much monster meat in the marketplace either, meaning the Adventurers' Guild must have been controlling the supply. But what now? If we were going to sell curry, monster meat was instrumental.

"That isn't to say there is no way of getting your hands on some," Rengill said, looking oddly tense.

Why? Was he going to recommend some kind of black market? I'd much rather avoid illegal means. Fortunately, my suspicions were soon debunked.

"You could just hunt it yourself."

"We could?"

"Yes, and I know just the place."

Rengill told us of a Haunt just south of Bulbola. It was a B-level Haunt called Crystal Cage. This place was the source of most of the monster meat sold in Bulbola. The Haunt was dangerous, crawling with D-Threat monsters, but we could hunt there, and it had the convenience of being near the city.

Sorry I ever doubted you, Captain. I guess you were just nervous about recommending something so dangerous.

Hunting our own monster meat was a great idea, though. What else could an adventurer do without materials? Hunt them on her own. We could make it in time for the cooking contest too, now that we knew where to look.

“It’s quite dangerous, but I’m sure you’ll be able to manage, Fran. Especially when you have Jet with you.”

“Yeah. We’ll be fine.”

“Woof!”

“And do contact us if you have any monster meat left over.”

Rengill’s merchant hat was on tight. We’d have to hunt a little bit more than we need now—it was the only way to thank him for the information. After all, we might need his help in the future.

Ingredients weren’t the only thing we needed.

“We’re also looking for a place to cook.”

We asked him for somewhere with a lot of space but out of the public eye. Not expecting much, I was pleased to see he had a lead. He called on one of his assistants for verification, but it seemed they had a building that fit.

“You’re in luck. Our real estate division tells me that we are in possession of a closed restaurant. It comes with a spacious kitchen, and people are not allowed to enter.”

The place was right next to the marketplace and shopping district too, which would come in handy during the competition. Since the restaurant was no longer in business, we could use it however we wanted.

“Sounds good. We’ll take it.”

“I’ll make the necessary arrangements for the lease. We’ll deliver your spices and flour there while we’re at it. You’ll get the keys together with the delivery.”

“Hm.”

Things were beginning to come together. Rengill must’ve been higher up the corporate ladder than we thought, since he wasn’t worried about any of the arrangements he was making. He offered to throw in paper bags for us to sell our curry bread in too, which was very considerate—we hadn’t even thought of that.

With everything in place, we left the Lucille Trade Association. The sun was setting, and the streets were lit with the orange glow of dusk. We walked along in the lengthening shadows and made our way to the Count’s mansion.

It’ll take a day for us to get to the Haunt on horseback.

A day trip was very much within the realm of possibility.

We’ll have to leave first thing in the morning. It’s going to be tight, but I’m counting on you two.

“We’ll do our best in the name of curry bread.”

“Woof, woof!”

Their appetites remained their primary motivation. I’d have to make a test batch for them when we got to the mansion.

We’ll have to take care of some errands before that.

“How goes the experiment in the slums?”

“Things are progressing smoothly.”

“I hear you’ve adjusted its strength and administered it to about a hundred people.”

“It has produced the effects that we’re looking for.”

“Splendid.”

“We’ve also learned that there is a difference in activation time with the diluted substance.”

“That doesn’t sound very good.”

“Yes. Adjustments during the real run might prove difficult.”

“Can’t you just make it as strong as it is now?”

“Then the substance would activate immediately. We would lose the element of stealth.”

“It must be difficult to adjust its strength so it kicks in at just the right time.”

“Yes. People might suspect him if we fail. It would only be a matter of time until he led them to us.”

“It is almost time for the real thing.”

“I’m thinking of increasing the number of subjects. If the slum dwellers aren’t enough, we’ll place an order with the black-market slavers. If worst comes to worst, we’ll have to increase the strength when we mix it in.”

“That’ll do. It’ll be the end for him if it works, anyway. It comes down to how quickly we can cut him off.”

“I suppose. Still, we need a large number of people to ingest it to complete our goal. Further adjustments are our first order of business.”

“I’ll leave that to you. We must gain that man’s favor at all costs.”

“He is our precious investor, after all.”

“Hah. Even if it’s only on the face of it.”

“It’s a good thing this order came when it did.”

“Indeed. We shall take advantage of the cooking contest as best we can.”

Chapter 2: Crystal Cage

We walked through the hustle and bustle of the crowd, making our way to the Count's mansion.

Fult, the prince of Phyllius, had insisted that we stayed with them, and we were compelled to take him up on it.

Jet hid in the shadows. He was too large and a bother to our fellow pedestrians. Also, he would terrify most of them.

This street should take us into the noble district.

"Hm."

Bulbola might be several times larger than Alessa, but they shared the same basic layout. The Count's mansion was in the center of the noble district and the center of the town. Around the noble district were the wealthy, then the average citizens, the business district, and finally a circle of the poor.

We were now in the wealthy part of town. The street wasn't a main road, and barely wide enough to fit a horse and carriage, but it was still crowded regardless.

As we were about to enter the noble district, we were faced with a problem. Namely, there were guards carrying out inspections at the gates. Their job was to keep suspicious individuals out of the noble district. Fran, looking like she'd never had anything to do with a noble, was naturally called out. I couldn't blame them. I'd suspect Fran of funny business, too.

"You are entering the noble district. Do you have any business here?"

"We can give you directions if you're lost."

They were polite at least. Fran looked more like a lost little girl than a criminal.

“I’m going to the Count’s manor.”

“What?”

“Why on earth...”

The younger of the guards looked furious for a second, but the older man noticed something. He whispered in his partner’s ear.

“Hang on. She might be the one we were told about...”

“Oh! The Black Cat girl! She does fit the description...”

“Pardon me, but may we ask for your name?”

“Fran.”

“Of course. Apologies, Miss Fran. Please, enter.”

“R-right this way!”

The older guard looked slightly troubled, but the younger was flustered and nervous.

I had a feeling they only recognized her because of the prince. He probably wanted to make sure that she reached the manor without any problems. As far as the guards were concerned, Fran was related to visiting royalty. They had to keep their code of etiquette, no matter what she looked like.

“Thanks.”

“Not at all! Do take care!”

Before we finally reached the manor, we ran into the same scenario twice more.

The noble district was large, even for a major city, and there were guards posted throughout. The Count’s manor was in front of us, although it was still quite some distance away. We were probably at the entrance now—imposing gates with knights guarding the front and a guard station for

them to rest in. The gates lent to the intimidation, and there were two knights posing as gatekeepers.

Fran showed no sign of fear and talked to them as she would to anyone.

“Hey, is this the Count’s mansion?”

The knight stopped, not expecting a little girl to talk to him so casually.

“Yes... Are you the one our guests have been waiting for?”

“Hm.”

“Excuse me, but may I see your identification?”

“Here you go.”

“Thank you. Please wait.”

The knight understood her purpose here before we could explain. He skipped the interrogations and went right into attending us.

The other knight went inside the small guardhouse with Fran’s adventurer card. There must’ve been a device to check its authenticity inside, because he soon returned and gave it back respectfully.

“Thank you for waiting. Please, right this way. He will show you inside.”

They were treating her like a guest of honor, although I couldn’t help but feel the formality hid something in his voice.

I knew Fran wouldn’t be able to keep her manners up for long. If perfect etiquette was expected of her, we would leave. Fran and Jet couldn’t stand it.

We followed the young knight inside. There was quite some distance between the gates and the actual manor itself. I suppose most guests arrived in a carriage. They

didn't expect that someone would actually get here on foot. We passed the garden, roughly three hundred meters of it, before finally coming into full view of the manor.

Unlike the front gates, which were built to deter robbers, the manor was magnificently elegant. It looked like those mansions I always imagined European Tudors would have lived in.

Several people were waiting for us out front, probably the butler and the maids of this place.

"Fran the Adventurer, I presume?"

"Hm."

"I am Sebastian, the butler of this manor. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Oh my God, did he say his name was Sebastian? I couldn't believe it. The cats would be named Tama, the dogs Pochi, and here was Sebastian the butler himself! In the flesh! This world kept getting better and better...

Sadly, Fran did not share my sentiments. She didn't see the big deal, and unceremoniously allowed him to show her in. If only she knew...

It was a fateful meeting regardless, and I had the Count of Bulbola to thank for that.

As I was lost in my little dream world, he led Fran into what looked like a waiting room.

"Fran, you're here!"

"We've been waiting for you."

Fult and Satya were already there. The stone-faced chamberlain, Sellid, was also there, along with the three orphans the prince had taken in. They had changed out of the rags they'd worn in Seedrun and looked more like nobles

than street urchins, though you could still tell who they were when they spoke. They each waved at Fran.

A well-built man sat beside them. He wasn't as impeccably dressed as the prince and princess but still looked like a noble, though I'd never seen a highborn with such military bearing. He looked like he'd be more at home on the front lines than hiding behind his troops.

"I am Marquis Rhodus Christon, Count of Bulbola."

"Hm. Fran. Adventurer." Fran didn't offer her hand, but bowed.

The marquis seemed arrogant, but I supposed that came with the territory. He did not return her bow. Christon was of high status and not required to lower himself to an adventurer. However, I sensed no ill will. He was just used to his position. He did what was natural to him without looking down on Fran.

"We are honored to welcome a guest of our highnesses here. Please, feel free to stay at our abode for as long as you are in Bulbola."

"All right."

The marquis seemed magnanimous, too. He wasn't the slightest bit upset at Fran's lack of court etiquette. He'd correctly deduced that showing Fran some hospitality was the best way to get into Fult's graces.

The prince regaled the Count with the tale of their encounter with illegal slavers in Seedrun and how a Raydossian said they had ties with a slaving ring in Bulbola. Then he asked the Count to apprehend these slavers.

Some espionage would be required, so it'd be difficult for the marquis to make his move right away, but it seemed that the local Knight Brigade was already on it.

"It's going to be tough."

The prince had used his clout as a member of the royal family to meet the Marquis Christon. But this was our chance to run down those slavers, so the least we could do was cheer Fult and Satya on.

Fran showed them the flyer and announced that she was going to be taking part in the contest.

"I see. Bulbola's cooking contest is famous throughout the realms."

"I believe one of the winners is actually employed in our royal palace back home. Is that right, Sellid?"

"Indeed. I believe the head chef won the contest ten years ago."

So it was true that the winner had a chance at working for royalty.

"So, how do you plan on beating these seasoned veterans of the culinary world?" Fult asked with a worried look.

Satya said nothing but looked equally troubled. It was testament to how difficult this would be, but Fran was unwavering in her confidence.

"We're going to win by presenting curry."

"Curry? Is that the dish you gave us back in Seedrun?"

"Yeah."

"That was delicious, indeed. I think you could go far with it."

"Far isn't good enough. We plan to go all the way to victory."

"I see. In that case, you have our support."

"Good luck, Fran."

Sebastian interrupted, excusing himself for cutting into our conversation and telling us dinner was served.

I thought Fran and the other children would be - expected to be on their best behavior, but dinner turned out to be quite relaxed. Marquis Christon never reprimanded the kids for their lack of etiquette. Fult and Satya had likely informed him that this particular friend wasn't comfortable with formalities.

Not to say the marquis was chummy with the other children, of course. But he left them to their own devices as he conversed with the royal twins.

"I was going to introduce you to my sons, but it would seem that they are running late. I apologize on their behalf."

"I've heard about your sons. Your eldest, in particular, is famed for being a gentleman," Sellid replied.

Reading between the lines, he was saying, "*You have the esteemed prince and princess of Phyllius in your presence, and they're running late, you say? What could possibly be more important than this?!*"

"My apologies," the marquis replied. "They were all present yesterday, but they're occupied by the Festival of the Moons. Things are getting more hectic as we close in on the festival, and the committee must stay on site to oversee preparations. Phillip is among them as the head of the Knight Brigade."

The marquis was smiling, but his words actually implied, "*Well, if you had come here yesterday as scheduled, everyone would've been here to greet you. It's your own damn fault for being late. We're busy enough this time of year without you around to add to our obligations. The captain of the Knight Brigade has no time to waste on pleasantries, so don't think everything will go according to your precious itinerary.*"

But such were conversations among the high and mighty, always wrapped in double meaning and sarcasm. The nobles here were just as roundabout as the politicians back home.

Still, I was surprised that Sellid, usually tone-deaf in social situations, could engage a noble with such eloquence. Then again, he was always trying to exult the prince and princess, so perhaps he was only feigning tone-deafness. Given his position as chamberlain, it was only natural that he'd have some oratory skills.

"So your eldest is the captain of the Knight Brigade?"

"Yes. Fights have been breaking out in the slum district, and the lad has been swamped with work."

"My goodness, how unfortunate. Well, just let him know that he is free to come and greet us at his leisure," the prince said nonchalantly. Sellid's hard work seemed to have escaped his notice.

"Thank you, Your Highness. Crime rates tend to go up this time of year, you know."

"Do they, really?"

"Yes. Most of them are intent on stealing from the tourists who've come for the festival."

Of course. The increase of human traffic inside the city walls made Bulbola a paradise for pickpockets and robbers.

The marquis continued bragging about his sons. In addition to Phillip, the captain of the Knight Brigade, there was Brook, the second son and manager of a fairly large trade association. He was even part of the upper echelons of the Merchant's Guild, making him even busier than his elder brother. Surprisingly, his third son, Waint, was a chef.

When the marquis mentioned that his son was taking part in the cooking contest, Fran took out the flyer.

“This one?”

“Yes. Are you participating as well?”

“Hm.”

“I see. Best of luck to you.” The marquis couldn’t be less interested. “I keep telling that boy to stop such foolishness and assist his brothers, but he just won’t listen.”

He even called it “foolishness” when a participant was sitting right in front of him! Although, I could understand how a noble of his stature saw being a chef as frivolous.

The marquis wasn’t a bad man, but he was definitely insensitive and seemed to enforce his view of the world on everyone around him. He indulged Fran, since she was a lowborn, but he seemed to think that being a chef was unbecoming for his son. I supposed his discrimination worked on a subconscious level since he expected everyone to see his reasoning.

No need to pout, Fran. This guy doesn’t mean anything by it.

But still...

I couldn’t have Fran arguing with the local count. I had to convince her.

You can prove him wrong with our cooking.

Hm. True.

Right? We’ll make the most delicious plate of food, and let him have it.

Okay. We’ll make curry so good he’ll have to bow down and cry.

I was glad that Fran was the quiet type. Although her talk of making the Count bow down suggested that she was still lacking common sense...

After dinner, she was led to her quarters—a guest room so grand it looked like a five-star hotel. We wouldn't have minded sleeping in the staff quarters, but they wouldn't let an honored guest of the Phyllian royal family stay in such paltry accommodations.

"If you need anything, ring that bell and one of our maids will attend you."

This place is huge...and fancy, too.

"Oooh, so fluffy."

"Woof!"

Unable to resist, Fran dove into the canopy bed right in the middle of Sebastian's explanation.

Stop jumping on the bed!

I'd told her over and over, but she just kept doing it! The marquis' bed looked like it cost a small fortune, and there was no way we would be able to pay if she broke it. What was the point of all these detailed carvings on the bedposts? Silver shafts glistened atop fine linen sheets.

I'll let you off the hook this time, Fran. But Jet, the bed is off limits for you tonight.

"Arf..."

Those puppy dog eyes won't work on me today! No means no!

Knowing that their appeals were falling on deaf ears, Fran and Jet turned to Sebastian.

"Can Jet sleep in bed with me, please?"

"Woof..."

Jet gave the butler his most pathetic whine as he rubbed against Sebastian's leg.

“B-but of course. We have as many changes of sheets as you may require, so use it to your heart’s content.”

“Thanks.”

“Arf!”

Well, I guess if the head butler said it was okay...

Just don’t mess the room up too much, all right?

We won’t.

“Woof, woof!”

Fran and Jet carried on exploring the room after Sebastian left, pulling out drawers and peeking into the fireplace.

Don’t break it, now.

“Hmm.”

I began my preparations for the cooking contest. I would start by testing some of the food we’d brought from the Dragonhead. I produced a clone of myself and started with the soup.

“Hmmm.”

It was delicious. Even my clone, with his blunted sense of taste, could tell. I wouldn’t be able to beat this if I just threw a pot of curry together and called it a meal. I’d have to prepare several flavors of curry bread and find a unique way of selling them.

We should go to the Adventurers’ Guild to research the Haunt.

Crystal Cage would be our first Haunt, so we couldn’t afford to be sloppy.

We told Sebastian we were going out, and he let us know we could reenter the mansion quickly using the staff entrance. It made sense that the help didn’t have to go

through the massive front garden whenever they left the estate.

There's a lot of people tonight.

The noble district was quiet, but as we headed downtown, more and more people crowded the streets.

"A lot of food stalls, too."

"Woof!"

It was the eve of the Festival of the Moons, and people were already celebrating, drinking, and dancing about the streets.

The inhabitants of the towns we'd visited so far retired to their homes when night fell, leaving only merchants and adventurers roaming the streets. The sight of a crowd drinking outside on the eve of a festival was new to me. It reminded me of Earth.

We have plenty of time to eat later. Let's get to the Adventurers' Guild.

"Munch, munch. Okay."

One day later.

We spent the night preparing for our excursion and prepared to leave the mansion at daybreak.

Having done our research the night before, we were well equipped to deal with whatever the Haunt could throw at us. Fran had been asleep most of the time... Still, I had most of the information in my head, so we would be all right.

Would've been a lot easier if there weren't anyone else using the library...

I had to manipulate Fran's sleeping body with Telekinesis the entire time I was researching. Despite it being so late, there were others still using the library. I supposed it

was par for the course in a big city guild. The biggest challenge of the night was extracting books from the bookshelves using Fran's body.

It was just like her to sleep in a library.

I was controlling her on this fine morning as well, given she was still half-asleep. I moved her barely conscious body to hold on to Jet, and let him drag her. I thought it made for a good party trick.

As we walked through the morning bustle, the scent of freshly cooked food soon woke Fran up. The Festival of the Moons was in full swing, and most of the shops and food stalls were still open from last night.

"Hm. I think I'll have some soup."

Sure. Don't forget to get some for Jet, too.

"Yeah."

Fran ordered a clear fish soup, tailored for people who were hungover.

She placed two orders and paid the lady at the stall, receiving soup-filled paper bowls in return. The fact that she could get paper utensils at a random food stall showed how advanced Bulbola was.

Fran set Jet's bowl down in front of him.

"It looks good."

"Woof, woof!"

Fran's eyes were sparkling with hungry anticipation when it happened.

"Woaaargh! Move it, move it, outta the way!"

"Kyaa!"

A ragged-looking man let out a scream as he bumped into a girl, who bumped into Fran in turn.

“...”

“Oh no! I’m so sorry.”

“Hm...”

Fran looked at her bowl as it rolled over the pavement, its delicious contents splattered all over the ground. Her sharp eyes darted to the rampaging man as he disappeared into the distance.

“You okay, honey?” asked the shopkeeper.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry I dropped it.”

“That’s all right. Did you burn yourself?”

“No. Thanks for asking.”

Fran bowed to the worried shopkeeper and left. She was serious now. Her lithe body slipped through the crowd, intent on stopping the man in his tracks.

“Hold it.”

“You shut up! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you dead!”

Lack of manners wasn’t the guy’s most immediate problem. His eyes were bloodshot, his speech slurred. He looked like he was on some sort of drug.

He showed no signs of stopping, so Fran tripped him up. The man flew into a tailspin and rolled a couple feet into the road.

Fran, I know you were upset about him wasting food, but don’t you think that’s a little bit much?

But even that wasn’t enough to quell Fran’s anger.

She healed the man as he lay twitching on the - pavement, then grabbed him by the collar and stood him up.

“You’ve committed a great crime.”

“Bwuh?”

“An absolute atrocity.”

No, he hasn’t. All of this could’ve been settled by asking the guy to pay for your soup.

“Shut up! Leggo of me! Aaargh!”

Something was off about him, but his maniacal strength was still no match for Fran. She soon stopped him squirming about.

You’ve caught him, but what now?

I’ll show him hell.

As Fran made her intentions clear, the city guards caught up to the commotion. I overheard their conversation as Fran handed the man over.

“Another one from the slums?”

“There sure are a lot of them this year. Some crazy drug must be making the rounds.”

“Sure looks like it.”

Marquis Christon had mentioned bouts of unrest in the slums. This man was one of its inhabitants.

Come on, stop glaring at him. We need to go.

“Hm...”

Oh, stop sulking. I’m sure he’ll face his fair share of discipline.

All right.

She wasn’t satisfied with that answer, but we couldn’t afford to waste any more time.

Today was the first day of the Festival of the Moons. Rituals would be performed tonight, and I wanted to return from the Haunt by then. We made our way to the city gates, stopping by the odd food stall here and there, and eventually left Bulbola.

Okay, we're going to have double time it from here. Jet, we're counting on you.

"Awooo!"

It took a day to reach the Haunt on horseback, but we could make the trip in three hours if Jet was at full speed. There was also a clear path made by many adventurers before us, so we had no fear of getting lost.

"Come on, Jet!"

"Woof, woof!"

Three hours later.

We're right on schedule.

"This is the Haunt?"

A wooded sea of looming trees stood before us. We could hear the sounds and auras of various monsters even from here.

Yep. Crystal Cage, B-Class Haunt.

"I can sense a lot of monsters."

"Woof."

Fran and Jet's expressions tightened in agreement.

So here's the plan. We're shooting for the middle section of the woods. Once there, we'll hunt only the monsters we can eat. A monster's mana reserve was no indicator of whether its meat was edible.

"Hm. Time to stockpile some meat."

"Arf, arf."

We didn't have much time, so we would only look for the monsters we needed. According to the books at the Adventurers' Guild, they generally lived in the middle of the forest.

With Fran on his back, Jet used Air Hop to leap over the woods. The plan was for him to jump all the way to the middle of the forest to minimize the risk of getting lost. As much as I wanted to hunt near the entrance, time was of the essence.

“Is that the Crystal Tree?”

Fran spotted the Haunt’s namesake from Jet’s back: an imposing crystalline tree three thousand meters tall. Its transparent trunk shone beautifully with sunlight and its own radiating mana.

It was a divine wonder. I had never seen anything like it.

They say that magic tree’s over three thousand years old.

The Crystal Tree radiated a certain kind of mana which attracted herbivorous monsters. These monsters feasted on the tree and offered it protection in return. In effect, the strange plant used monsters as its defense, which wasn’t to say that herbivores were the only ones there. Their presence attracted carnivorous predators in turn, making the Crystal Cage a thriving ecosystem for all sorts of creatures.

This was the world’s greatest crystal tree. The larger they grew, the more mana they contained and the stronger the monsters it attracted. I could only imagine the beasts that made their home around this three-thousand-year-old specimen. You could say that this tree had single-handedly created the entire Crystal Cage.

“Wow.”

“Woof.”

Fran and Jet were just as impressed. Their eyes glowed with wonder as they took in its beauty. I’d never seen such

childlike wonder on Fran's face. That alone was worth the trip.

Tiny birdlike creatures flew about the tree. They looked minuscule against the giant crystal tree behind them, but they must've had at least a five meter wingspan. I made a note to avoid them if at all possible.

Careful, now. The closer we get to that tree, the more likely we are to run into high-threat monsters.

"I know."

We're almost to our destination. See any quarry, Fran?

"Hm... What about that one?" Fran had seen a large pig monster bathing in some mud.

Good eye. Jet, land us over there.

"Bark!"

All right, let's take it down in one.

"Will do."

"Woof, woof!"

Jet targeted the closest monster and descended on it like a hawk, maw first. Fran jumped off his back and cut another one to pieces.

"Oink!"

"Jet, over there."

"Grrr!"

It didn't take long for us to kill five of the F-Threat Swamp Pigs. These monsters lived in the marsh and had hard shells on their backs. We were thrilled to have completed our first successful hunt, but if I was being honest, these swamp swine weren't worth much.

As far as taste was concerned, Swamp Pork didn't taste bad. In fact, it was quite delicious. However, it wasn't quite

as tasty as specially bred pork, which was usually raised in particular conditions, and it took time to get the swamp stink out of the meat. They were known as the Novice Adventurer's Piggy Bank, since beginners usually hunted them for money.

Impressive as they were, these were not the pig monsters we were looking for. We stored them away anyway, just in case we couldn't find our main quarry.

Time to look for more monsters, Jet.

"Arf!"

"Should we go deeper?"

Yeah, let's get closer to the Crystal Tree. I think we're still too close to the entrance.

Swamp Pigs were usually found roaming at the edges of Crystal Cage. The fact that we'd run into an entire drift of them indicated we were not far enough in.

We advanced into the forest for an hour until we finally found a boar to our liking.

Our expedition had been a pain in the hilt so far. All we wanted was monster pork and beef, yet we'd run into creatures that were inedible at best.

"So does this guy taste good?"

Yep. Boar. Large tusks. Golden mane. That's our boy.

Gullinbursti, a D-Threat monster named after the mythical boar with a similar golden mane. That mane could deflect a certain amount of magic, and its tusks could fell a tree in a single charge. The Gullinbursti was even aggressive enough to attack creatures stronger than itself. People called it the Mad Boar for its tenacity and seeming inability to do anything other than charge forward.

For all its pugnacity however, its flesh was surprisingly soft, and its fat delectable. The Adventurers' Guild would often post hunting quests for the Gullinbursti, and its meat was popular throughout Bulbola. Fortunately for us, this pig monster was huge, over five meters long—easily three times bigger than Jet.

Don't go too crazy on the offense. We want to preserve as much meat as possible.

“Got it.”

Jet, you slow it down.

“Grrrr!”

If we wounded it, it would bleed. The more it bled, the more flavor the meat would lose. The texture would suffer as well, becoming too tough to eat. We had to kill it with as few blows as possible. One strike through its crystal was the ideal...but Telekinetic Catapult was out of the question. Even if I could kill it, I'd explode the entire Gullinbursti into mincemeat.

“Oink!”

Watch out, Fran!

As I was considering our options, the golden boar charged. The pig was faster than I expected. It was bearing down on us before I noticed. I tried slowing it down with Telekinesis but to no avail. The creature was a lump of pure strength.

“Urgh!”

Fran! You okay?

“More or less...”

The boar's charge only grazed her, but it was enough to fling her ten meters away. The beast was a force to be

reckoned with. Fran regained her footing with a well-placed Air Hop and dropped into her battle stance.

The Gullinbursti continued its charge, felling trees that could have served as shrine pillars back on Earth, and disappeared into the forest.

However, Jet had its scent, so we were in no danger of losing the trail. This was the perfect time to set a trap.

I'll dig a hole with Earth Magic. Jet, you lure him over. Our trap won't hold him for long, but we only need a few seconds for Fran to take him down.

"Got it."

"Woof."

I created a large underground sinkhole with Earth Magic. If anything heavy got on top of it, the crust would give way. It was the perfect pitfall for our pig friend.

A few minutes later, Jet reappeared with the Gullinbursti hot on his tail. He strutted in front of the giant boar as if challenging it. Jet had even shape-shifted to his smaller size to increase his cheekiness.

"Arf!"

"Oink!"

Steam gushed out of the Gullinbursti's huge nostrils. It charged at the tiny wolf, intent on crushing it, and felled many trees along the way. The momentum reminded me of a truck, and the boar soon paid for it. Its golden-furred leg sank into the ground, leaving half of its body exposed.

"Oink?!"

My pitfall worked perfectly.

Now, Fran!

"Hm!"

Fran leapt towards the golden boar.

“Where’s this thing’s crystal?”

It should be right at its heart.

“Hm!”

I Transmogrified myself into a long and slender blade, more able to reach the creature’s heart with one strike. In effect, I’d taken on the form of an estoc.

“Haaaa!”

“Oiiinkkk!”

Fran used an underhand grip and plunged me right into the beast.

“There!”

She used a Level 8 Sword Art, Pinpoint Stab, and thrust me right through the boar’s back. The skill concentrated all of her energy in the point of my blade, and I had little trouble penetrating the beast’s golden mane and musculature. I felt myself pierce its heart and crystal. The blow had barely bruised the Gullinbursti. The perfect end to our hunt.

We did it!

“Hm. That’s a lot of meat.”

It sure is. That’s our pork supply settled.

The giant boar provided us with more than enough pork for the contest. We stored it away for now. As much as we would’ve loved to take it apart, the scent of its blood would attract nearby monsters. We’d have to skin and prepare it at the Adventurers’ Guild.

Let’s move on!

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

We hunted monsters for the next two hours.

First was the Apis, a crafty white cow monster that could use Healing Magic. We hunted two of those. Somehow, we also killed five Gullinkambi and golden bird monsters that whizzed through the trees at blinding speeds with beaks that pierced metal. Finding their nest, we took eight of their golden eggs—each bigger than the largest ostrich egg on Earth. It was a great haul.

But the monsters here were tough, and we were pretty spent after the hunt. Although the Haunt's encounter rate wasn't as high as a Dungeon, staying here for extended periods of time was still a bad idea. Now that we'd finished our business, we should head home.

But before we could, a strange feeling came over the forest. The local monsters started to get agitated. The weaker ones in particular looked tense, as if they were terrified of something swooping down from above. The air became heavy, and even Jet looked restless.

Still, even when I used Being Sense, I couldn't figure out the source of this agitation. Was it just me?

Soon, the source of terror revealed itself.

KABOOM!

“Huh?”

Whoa! What is that mana signature?

“Bark...”

Thunder rumbled through the Haunt as an immense mana signature emerged from near the crystal tree. It was so strong that I could feel it from all the way out here.

“Teacher, over there.”

Looks like some flying monsters.

A gigantic bird flew out of the crystal tree. It sparkled with a bluish white light. I couldn't cast Identify on it from here, but one look was enough to remind me what it was.

It's a Thunderbird, and there's three Storm Eagles around it.

The Thunderbird was a B-Threat monster, while the Storm Eagles were D-Threats. The encyclopedia I read at the Adventurers' Guild warned us about the Thunderbird, saying we should steer clear of its electric attacks. Its unrivaled speed made it the ruler of the Crystal Cage.

But the strange mana signature I sensed didn't belong to the Thunderbird.

"Is someone fighting it?"

A figure jumped through the sky and clashed with the flock. This was the source of mana. We were quite a distance away from it, but the mana still reverberated here.

The aura belonged to a person. Somehow, they'd managed to trip my Danger Sense and Being Sense despite the great distance. I couldn't make out the figure's face, but their hair was done in a topknot and they were outfitted with dark blue equipment.

They fought the Thunderbird alone. I would've called it reckless if it didn't look like they were winning.

"It's starting."

"Woof."

Lightning streamed out of the Thunderbird's beak. Megawatts of electricity lit up the forest, and thunderous rumbling echoed through the trees. The shadow easily dodged out of the way.

The attack would have been a killing blow for us, but it was likely no more than an opening feint to the Thunderbird.

Its flock charged through the electricity, heading for the figure.

The bird's speed must be imperceptible at close range. We could only see it move because we were watching the fight from such a distance.

In a show of superhuman reflexes, the figure dodged again.

Now I understood why the Thunderbird was an object of fear for the forest's inhabitants. Flightless creatures were helpless in the face of its lightning and its speed. Even if a creature could move as fast, it still had to worry about the lightning.

Although it was the same threat level as the Daemon we'd faced, I didn't think we stood a chance. Unlike the dungeon Daemon, the Thunderbird was unfettered and had access to all its abilities. Not to mention the Storm Eagles that served as its vanguard.

All of which made me wonder about this lone figure.

None of the birds' attacks even grazed them, although the streams of electricity seemed to split the sky itself. In fact, it looked like the figure was baiting the flock to attack.

The eagles circled around the stranger in an effort to regroup, and the figure went on the offensive, eager to exploit the opening. Their counterattack was the beginning and end of this encounter.

"So many swords."

Magic? Or is it a Skill?

The figure thrust out their hand and summoned a large number of swords all around them. The swords appeared so quickly, it was like they teleported into existence. I wasn't sure if the figure had summoned them or if they were just manifestations. Each sword emitted great amounts of mana,

and Identifying them revealed that each was as strong as an enchanted weapon.

The swords launched at the electric birds all at once.

Although they were slower than my Telekinetic Catapult, the sheer number of them overwhelmed the Thunderbird's flock. There must've been about a hundred blades altogether, and they didn't just fling themselves towards their targets, either. Instead, they fluttered about with the precision of a choreographed dance, leaving the birds no room for escape.

Enclosed in a cage of swords, the monsters fell one by one.

Even the Thunderbird, who struggled until the bitter end, had holes in its wings from the storm of swords. A greatsword dealt the killing blow, stabbing the Thunderbird in the neck. With that, the great lightning bird fell out of the sky in a tailspin.

"Wow."

Yeah. Let's try not to run into either of those things.

We didn't know the stranger's intentions. What if they were a bandit? They just beat a Thunderbird, a foe we had little chance of defeating, in an instant. I didn't want to make an enemy of them if at all possible.

The figure disappeared towards the crystal tree, probably to claim their spoils.

We already got what we came for. Let's pack up and head home.

"Hm."

"Woof."

We left the Crystal Cage, feeling as though we'd - escaped the mysterious figure, and made our way back to Bulbola. We still needed to prepare the monster meat for our curry.

"Teacher, there's a lot of people over there."

Maybe they're adventurers guarding a caravan.

"But something seems...off."

We found the caravan on the highway, five carriages in total. Today was the first day of the Festival of the Moons, and we were about an hour from Bulbola. They were probably visitors from nearby villages heading over to take part in the festival. Fran was right, though. They were acting strange.

The caravan had stopped, and I could hear pained cries coming from their direction. Upon closer inspection, the leading carriage was riddled with arrows.

I think they're being robbed.

The men surrounding the caravan were dressed rather crudely and didn't look like your usual bodyguards. Plus, their swords were pointed towards the caravan rather than away from it. The bandits had even succeeded in destroying the lead carriage's wheels.

"We have to help them!"

Step on it, Jet!

"Woof!"

As we dropped in from the air, we saw some female adventurers defending the caravan from the bandits.

"Don't rough 'em up too badly, now! We can make a small fortune selling these ladies!"

"Hya ha ha! You got it!"

"I can't wait to sample them!"

The bandits' words sharpened Fran's glare. They sounded like slavers, and that marked them as her mortal enemies.

"Hang in there, you two!"

"If we let up now, they'll get to the villagers."

"We'll protect them with our lives!"

The women were putting their lives on the line to protect the passengers. They showed no desire to escape, even if it meant death. I liked them. They had guts.

"Come on!"

Okay. Now, which one is the leader... I think it's that one.

A large man stood behind the raiding party, barking out orders. He was better equipped than the rest, and his stats were higher, too. He must be their leader.

"Haaa!"

"Gyaa!"

Fran jumped off Jet's back and struck the bandit - captain, knocking him unconscious. We wanted information, and this guy was our best bet.

"The rest can die."

"Grrr!"

Faster than the eye could follow, Fran beheaded bandits.

"Huh?"

"Who's there?!"

"A kid?!"

Both bandits and bodyguards were equally confused. However, Fran and Jet didn't slow down until all the robbers were dead. Fran took down the ones at the back of the

caravan while Jet took care of the front. The remaining stragglers were quickly dispatched with a liberal application of Flame Magic, leaving the leader as the sole survivor.

“Are you okay?” Fran asked the bewildered adventurers.

“...”

Barely two minutes had elapsed since we arrived, and the marauders were all but obliterated. It wasn’t surprising that this hadn’t really sunk in yet.

“Area Heal.”

They seemed hurt, so it made sense to heal them. With their bodies recovered, their wits soon returned.

“Healing Magic?”

“Thanks!”

“I thought we were goners...”

The three adventurers looked relieved, but it didn’t take long for them to put their professional facade back on. They were still on duty and couldn’t let their guard down.

The adventurers took turns shaking Fran’s hand. Afraid as they were of her and Jet, their fears were overwhelmed by gratitude.

“We’re an adventuring party, the Crimson Maidens. You really saved us back there.”

“I’m Fran, D-Rank Adventurer.”

“D-Rank at your age? That’s amazing! I knew you were something special when I saw you fight.”

Some of the villagers got out of the caravan and reeled at the sight of the dead bandits. The scene might have been a tad intense for ordinary townsfolk. Their bodyguards explained how Fran had saved their lives, and the villagers bowed their heads in gratitude. Some of them even sobbed

in relief. They must've been terrified by the prospect of being captured. Then again, it was equally possible that the sorry state of the bandits' bodies might have scared them to tears.

Saving them wasn't our only goal, of course.

"Hey."

"Grrr."

Fran healed the bandit leader and hit him again, signaling the beginning of his torture.

"Eaaagh! I'll talk! I'll talk! Just spare my life!"

"Answer my questions, and I won't kill you."

"Okay! Just don't kill me, please!"

Fran's frosty voice and Jet's menacing growls must've scared him witless. Or maybe he caught a glimpse of what was left of his friends. Either way, he frantically told us exactly how many men he had and how to find their hideout. He also revealed that the bandits had already captured some innocent people. They were alive, though not well, and he'd planned to sneak into Bulbola where he could sell them as slaves.

Fran was intent on foiling those plans. It wasn't that she had a strong sense of justice but that she hated slavers.

As we neared the end of the torture, the village mayor approached.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Raid their hideout, of course."

"I-I see..."

Someone would have to stand guard while the caravan made repairs. Returning to find it annihilated would leave a bad taste in my mouth, so we left Jet behind as insurance. He should suffice until the carriages were fixed.

"I'm going to the hideout to save the captives," said Fran. "When I do, I want you to let them join the caravan. In exchange, I'll leave Jet here with you."

Alone, we had no way of getting the captives home, even if we could save them. We were going to need their help.

"So you're leaving behind this wolf..."

The mayor looked decidedly worried. He probably wanted Fran to stay behind. But he forced a smile and bowed gratefully, realizing that he was in no position to look a gift direwolf in the mouth.

"Then we are in your care."

"Look after them, Jet."

"Woof!"

There was still a hint of worry on the mayor's face, but they would be safe for now.

Let's get going.

"Hm. Walk."

"All right, all right! No need to yank my chain."

With the bandit leader's guidance, we soon reached their hideout. It was a good fifteen minutes away, but the walk was uneventful. The place was located in a cave at the foot of a mountain. It had the look and feel of a hideout, to be sure.

Surprisingly, the entrance was concealed with magic. Despite our detection skills, it would have been hard to find if the bandit leader hadn't revealed it to us. This wasn't your run-of-the-mill band of bandits then.

With that in mind, we carefully entered the hideout. It was quite fortified, despite looking like an ordinary cave from the outside. There were over twenty men left, and they

put up one hell of a fight. We couldn't let our guard down thanks to all the arrows that were flying about.

The bandits themselves were strong. Some of them could use Sword Arts, and they even had mages among their ranks. They were more like an organized unit of mercenaries than a rowdy band of outlaws.

The base was equipped with an emergency exit, as well. The bandit leader showed us where it was, and we promptly blew it up with Flame Magic. Two birds with one stone.

The man who'd been our guide so far wasn't the boss but only the captain of a smaller unit. The real boss was lazing about in the inner chambers. But I'd gotten used to referring to our captive as the Bandit Leader, so Bandit Leader he would stay. Unfortunately, Bandit Leader died halfway through our raid.

A stray arrow, loosed by one of his men, pierced him in the gut. As our guide, he was taking point, after all. And I suppose we neglected to heal his wounds. His last words were, "I thought you said you weren't going to kill me?!"

Well, we kept our end of the bargain. Mostly. We couldn't help it if one of his friends put an end to his life by mistake.

We found seven men locked away in the dungeon. Three of them looked like soldiers, while the remaining four seemed to be civilians. A quick Identify revealed they were adventurers and farmers. Fran broke them out of their cells and shackles. They were captured a few days ago, but thankfully none of them were wasting away just yet.

"You really saved us there."

"Didn't think a little girl would be the one to do it, though..."

“Come on, did you see how she blew up our cell? She’s way stronger than us!”

The adventurers weren’t a party, but they’d become acquainted with each other during their imprisonment. However, the farmers all came from the same village and knew each other well. They were on their way to Bulbola when the bandits attacked. Such was the risk of travelling without an escort, not that they had money to hire one.

“There were a lot of bandits out there. Did you run into the raiding party?”

“Yeah. All dead now.”

“Uh. By ‘all’ do you mean *all*? ”

“Of course.”

“I can’t sense their auras. She must be telling the truth.”

“Damn, I knew you were strong, but this is a bit much to take... The bandits here were pretty strong too, you know.”

I knew they weren’t ordinary raiders. The Bulbolan adventurers told us about a gang of bandits, fifty strong. They seemed to have popped up out of nowhere, and I suspected they were a splinter cell of a larger band of mercenaries.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Hm? I’ve settled my business, so I’m heading back.”

“You have friends out there?”

“I wouldn’t call them friends, but there are people waiting for me.”

“Okay, so you have backup with you. I think this gang stored up quite a hoard for themselves...”

“Hm?”

One of the adventurers explained. In the event anyone succeeded in eliminating the bandits, they had full rights to whatever treasure and goods the bandits had collected. Unfortunately for the captives, their belongings were now part of the bandit hoard.

We brought them with us and found an underground storeroom. There wasn't any treasure, but we did find weapons, food, and clothing. You could make a fair bit of money by selling it all.

In the pile, we found what we were looking for, stored in a bag that stopped its contents from deteriorating. Cure Turmeric, which looked like ordinary tree root. Despite appearances, the plant possessed magical properties. Properly processed, it could cure any status ailment and was a highly sought-after cooking spice. And there was a lot of it in the bag.

Now, this is a great find!

With my Cooking skill, I could tell at a glance what kind of flavor it would produce. It'd taste similar to the turmeric I knew on Earth and would add a significant amount of depth and richness to our curry. At the moment, the flavor of this stuff was much more important than its healing properties. We'd really lucked out. Fran tucked it away, with apologies to the original owner and promises to make one hell of a curry.

As we counted our lucky stars, the adventurers started talking. Their equipment was in this pile of stolen goods, and they wanted to ask Fran if they could have them back.

The oldest adventurer spoke up first.

"So, uh...there's something I've been meaning to ask you..."

"What's up?"

"Well, the bandits stripped us of our equipment when they captured us, you see. And we're pretty sure it's in this pile of stuff. I don't suppose we could have it back?"

"W-we'll pay you, of course. We'll carry your haul."

"Hell, the three of us should be able to get at least half of this stuff back to town."

The men knew that Fran couldn't carry her spoils alone, no matter how strong she was. They offered to be her pack mules in exchange for their gear.

"So, how about it—what?"

"Hm?"

Fran, the nice adventurers are still talking! At least wait until they're finished before you start packing the spices into the Pocket Dimension!

"Space-time magic... I figured."

"Don't know what I was expecting really..."

"I guess you have no need for us..."

The adventurers were crestfallen at their obsolescence.

Teacher, do you mind if I give them back their stuff?

Oh, I guess you were listening. Sure, I don't see why not.

I didn't sense any weapons with huge amounts of mana in the pile, anyway. I didn't think adventurers with enchanted equipment would've been done in by a gang of bandits to begin with.

"Just take your stuff if it's still there."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Sure. I don't need them, anyway. There's still something I want you to do, though."

"S-sure. Just say the word!"

"We'll be taking part in the cooking contest. I want you all to come to our stall and tell everyone you know about it. Promise me that, and you can have your gear."

"Is that all? We'd love to!"

"We'll buy your entire stock! Well, as long as it's not crazy expensive."

"We'll shill for you, sure!"

The adventurers and farmers thanked Fran again. They didn't expect to get their equipment back for just promoting her food stall. As we stored away the remainder of the hoard, the scout-class adventurer began tapping the walls.

"Say, I think there's another room."

It seemed the bandits had a hidden chamber. The adventurer groped along the walls, looking for an entrance. Fran wasn't so patient.

"Move."

"O-kay. I can't seem to find a door, so—"

Boom!

Fran knocked down the wall with her Advanced Sword Art. The adventurers stood there stunned as she punched through solid rock, reminded of the difference in strength between them.

And here's our treasure trove.

While it was no dragon's hoard, there was still a decent amount of gold and silver. The hidden room also held a heavy metal box, important enough to be stowed away in secret. When we opened it, we found a single glass bottle filled with mysterious fluid. It looked like your run-of-the-mill potion, but I was sure that it was something more. I sensed great mana in that bottle, and the inside of the box was cushioned so it wouldn't break.

Let's Identify it.

However, my Identify failed. I could only learn its name: Soul Essence. I didn't know what it was for, but the fact that it was sealed with magic scared me. And it was more carefully packed than the rare metals, so it must be valuable. I stowed it in my Pocket Dimension for the time being.

We got what we came for. Let's get going.

"Hm."

We were running a little late. We were supposed to be back in Bulbola by now.

The men grew hungry on the way back to the caravan, so Fran handed them skewers and sandwiches to sate their appetite. The farmers received them with tears. They must've been distressed by their time in the bandits' den. Soon, the adventurers joined in—thanking Fran with misty eyes. I knew then that they would keep their end of the bargain.

"They're back!"

"Over here, you guys!"

Caravan repairs had proceeded smoothly. The bandits' bodies were tossed in a neat pile, but goblin corpses with bite marks had taken their place around the carriages. It was a good thing we left Jet behind.

"Looks like you're okay. I didn't expect the bandits would give you much trouble."

"Hm. I beat them up, easy. I got a good haul out of it, too."

"We're good to go over here. Are those the captives from the hideout?"

"We sure are. Fran here saved us."

With a quick explanation what went on at the hideout, we prepared to get going. There were five carriages in total, and we managed to fit all of the men onto them, though it was tight.

Fran rode on the lead carriage and guarded the caravan back to Bulbola. She talked about the contest with the other passengers in the meantime and told them about the Black Tail. Our time wasn't wasted, after all.

An hour passed, and we reached Bulbola without further disturbance. We parted ways with the villagers and made our way to the Adventurers' Guild. Since we needed to prepare the monster meat from the Crystal Cage, we requested to use the Dismantling Room and were led downstairs to the basement.

This place is bigger than Alessa.

We could carve up even large quarry here. The facilities were much better too, since it was equipped with a magical device that spouted water.

Let's start with the Gullinbursti.

"Okay."

I took the golden boar out of the Pocket Dimension.

Let's drain it of blood first.

"Hm."

Fresh monster blood could be used as a medical component or food ingredient. I suspended the freshly drained blood with Telekinesis and promptly stored it in the Pocket Dimension. I stored its heart too, despite the fact it was inedible.

"These tusks are huge."

Apparently, we can get a lot of money for its fur.

We'd hunted the boar mainly for its meat but ended up getting a lot of other materials in the process. We carved the Apis and Gullinkambi up, too. Now, we had enough meat to make pork, beef, and chicken curries, not that we were going to use all of it. Some parts just wouldn't taste as good.

Now we can sell everything else.

"Hm. Where to, though? Lucille Trade Association?"

Hang on, there's still something I want to look into.

I needed to know about the potion from the bandits' hideout. We should be able to find an alchemist in a city this big, but where should we start?

Thirty minutes later, having sold all our leftover materials, Fran and I headed to the third floor of the Adventurers' Guild. We asked the receptionist where we could find an alchemist, and she told us that the guild employed one just for such an occasion.

He was pretty good, too. We decided to leave the identification of the mysterious potion in his hands.

The older elf woman led us to his office and knocked on the door. The nameplate said "Eugene's Laboratory". This section seemed to house the biological research facilities. I saw the words "Sickbay" and "Atelier" written on adjourning doors.

"Come in."

"Excuse us."

An old man in loose robes was waiting inside. His slicked-back white hair flowed all the way to his back. He had a gentle smile, wise-looking round glasses, and the air of a scholar or researcher. He was lanky, although I wasn't sure if he was underweight or just tall.

His eyes were strange though. What were supposed to be the whites of his eyes were black as ink, and his irises

were emerald green. They had no shine to them either, giving the man an eerie quality. He looked like he had long thin feelers growing out of his hairline, too.

The alchemist was unsettling to look at. Fortunately for us, the elf lady greeted him like she would anyone else, reducing our shock. If we ran into this guy out on the city streets, we would've been on full alert.

"This girl wishes to consult you, Doctor Eugene."

"Really? This adorable little girl is an adventurer?"

"Hm. D-Rank Adventurer, Fran."

"And a D-Rank at that? My, aren't you special."

Eugene was apparently half-insect. An insectile beastman. At least, half of him was. The eyes and feelers were all he got from his bug heritage. Ordinary insect beastmen must've looked more insectoid than human.

He really was a master alchemist though. One quick Identify indicated that he had maxed out his Alchemy skill and its advanced form, Biochemistry. He bore the titles Item Expert, Poison Master, Potion Master, Master Alchemist, and several others.

He invited us to sit down and introduced himself.

"My name is Eugene, an alchemist employed by the Adventurers' Guild at Bulbola."

It made me wonder...

"You're not in the Alchemists' Guild?"

"Ha ha ha. Indeed. I used to be, but I had to take responsibility for one of my apprentice's mishaps. I was hired by the Adventurers' Guild afterwards."

"Oh, but none of it was your responsibility, Doctor. Your apprentice was already an established alchemist. There was

no need for you to step down," the elf interjected as she served our drinks.

It sounded like there was a long story behind his employment.

"Perhaps. But the fact remains that he used the knowledge I taught him for evil."

"I still think your banishment was over the line!"

The anger in the elf's voice made for a terrible impression of the Alchemists' Guild. She must've really liked him.

"Wouldn't joining the Adventurers' Guild make your relationship with the Alchemists' Guild worse?" Fran asked. The alchemists couldn't have any fond feelings for an exile who joined another guild so easily.

"It did," said the elf. "They harassed him every day until their Guildmaster stepped down."

"That was five years ago. I get along just fine with the current Guildmaster."

"There are still people who bear a grudge against him, though. Not to mention those alchemists who hate - adventurers to begin with."

The scandal was so huge that the animosity trickled down to Eugene's former guildmates. Did that extend to the Adventurers' Guild as well? Surely, strained relations with the alchemists would make getting adventuring supplies more difficult.

"Does the Adventurers' Guild hate Eugene?"

"Not at all. In fact, many of our members are grateful to him."

"How come?"

"Thanks to the Doctor's alchemical skills, we are able to produce our supplies here at the guild itself. He effectively broke the Alchemist Guild's monopoly on such things. The price war made everything cheaper, and that meant many happy adventurers."

"You can see why a lot of alchemists would hate me."

I did. I felt sorry for Eugene's banishment, but we did get a top-notch alchemist out of it, and we didn't even have to leave the building.

"Either way, the old guard at the Alchemists' Guild is beginning to change. We've started cooperating with them again."

"Yes. However, the new moderates in the Alchemists' Guild are as lukewarm in their studies as in their grudges. I get the feeling they're just here to steal the Doctor's work sometimes."

The elf left the room after that, still seething with resentment.

"Please, have a drink before we get started." He offered us a cup of what looked like oolong tea.

"Thanks." Fran took small sips, her cat's tongue not - allowing anything more.

"My goodness, you're fine after all that?" Eugene asked with wonder, taking a sip out of his own cup.

Was it poisoned? It shouldn't be. My Identify only - revealed regular Oboe Tea. Fran hadn't caught any status ailments, either...

"Well, I love this stuff, you see. Thing is, most of my visitors find it too bitter. They end up spitting it out more often than not. Are you sure there's nothing wrong with your tongue, young lady?"

"No. It's nice."

"Well, I'll be! I didn't think I'd ever find someone who understands the wonderful flavor of this tea!"

Was it like *senburi* tea? If so, it must have been an acquired taste.

"It's bitter, but tasty."

Fran had a sensitive tongue, able to distinguish fine flavors in the background of bitter and spicy. It allowed her to find the deliciousness in even the oddest of combinations.

"Indeed, indeed! I'm glad I've finally found a kindred spirit. Would you like some of the tea leaves, young lady?"

"Please."

Fran nodded and took the small pouch of tea leaves Eugene produced. He was really excited as he handed it over; happy to find someone who liked his favorite drink.

"So I can make really good tea with this?"

"Actually, there is another secret ingredient. I used Mana Water. Mana-laced water with no particular side effects."

"So infusing food with mana makes it taste better?"

"You didn't know? The human tongue has mana--receptive taste buds. That is why monster meat has that extra bit of flavor compared to regular livestock. Mana-infused water is usually used to brew tea and soup."

"If mana can make all food taste better, why isn't everyone using it?"

That was a good question. Mana seemed to be the best general purpose seasoning. However, Eugene shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. There are different types of mana, and the ingredient itself must be infused with mana from the outset. The mana water I use comes from a

spring that is naturally infused. Adding mana after the cooking process wouldn't have the same effect."

That was unfortunate. And here I thought we'd found a way to give us an edge for the contest.

"Also, it is not good for one to consume too much mana in one's cooking."

"Really?"

"Yes. Consuming too much mana causes you to crave it. It can get so bad that it overpowers the other flavors."

In human terms, it was like someone who always needed to have his food extra spicy or extra sweet. Their taste buds were dulled by the strong flavors. Mana had the same effect.

"Take the Magi, for example. They have a natural sensitivity to mana. They love their food to be drenched with it. Unfortunately, feasting on mana-rich food from an early age leads to a dulling of their tongues. For a Magus, the taste of mana is all that matters. I remember having to eat food cooked by a great magus once. That was the most difficult plate of food I've ever had to consume."

I remembered Jean the necromancer and the food that he served in his laboratory. That was the only time I ever saw Fran not clean her plate. Jean's tongue must have been dulled that way, too.

I needed to make sure that Fran understood mana wasn't the crux of cooking but only one of many subtle flavorings. As I renewed my cooking resolve, Fran finished her tea, returned it, and bowed her head.

"Thank you for the tea. It was delicious."

"Ah, it was my pleasure. Now, what did you come to talk about?"

"I wanted you to take a look at this bottle."

“Oh?”

Fran took out the metal case and produced the Soul Essence from inside.

Eugene took one look at it and immediately deduced what it was. I expected nothing less from a master alchemist.

“This is Soul Essence. You happened upon a most - interesting substance.” Eugene looked surprised as he rested his chin on his hand. Soul Essence must be rare.

“I found it in a bandit’s hideout. What is it for? Is it a magic drug?”

“Not exactly, although it *is* technically a magical drug... Soul Essence is used in the manufacture of artificial crystal.”

“Artificial crystal?”

“Which, in turn, is used in the creation of familiars. Soul Essence is the base of their crystal. The fact that this one is so difficult to Identify means it has the potential to become a very strong crystal indeed.”

“How much is it worth?”

“Hmm. One hundred thousand at least, one hundred million at most.”

A hundred million? Then that thing was worth a fortune! I guessed the crystal it could produce must be worth at least that much, if not more! Eugene did say that it could produce an immensely strong crystal...

“What kind of crystal will it become? Can you tell?”

“Unfortunately, no. An Identify would usually reveal what crystal it can become, but this Soul Essence seems impervious to it. Which leaves us with consulting the manufacturer...”

Eugene checked the bottle and every nook and cranny of the box.

"I can't seem to find any documentation... Where was this made?"

"There wasn't anything else where I found it."

"I see. Well, I can look into it. It's going to take some time, however."

"Can't you just...turn it into a crystal?"

If so, we could take it from there. But things weren't that simple.

"The process of converting Soul Essence into crystal requires other materials and magical drugs, all dependent on the potential crystal. We cannot do it until we know what crystal it is meant to become."

Basically, we couldn't just wing it. I could have easily absorbed whatever crystal it ended up as, too. We couldn't think of alternative ways to use it, so I guess this was going to have to sit pretty in our inventory for a while.

"How long will it take to know what Soul Essence this is?"

"Three days at least, ten days at most, I suppose."

The way Eugene put it, I'd expected the process to take a few months. Fran looked as surprised as I was.

Teacher?

I guess we could give it to him...

Eugene seemed trustworthy, and it wasn't as if he was going to bolt. If he did, he'd have the entire Bulbolan Adventurers' Guild on his tail.

"Still..." Eugene said, frowning.

"What is it?"

“This box looks exactly like the ones the Alchemists’ Guild would use, even with its lack of documentation. Its manufacturer must be using the guild’s channels for transportation.”

“But I found it in a bandit’s den.”

“And I believe you... It’s just...”

Something was bothering him.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry. There is something I must ask.”

“Well?”

“You are an adventurer and the one who found this box. It’s only right that you know. When a powerful Soul Essence goes missing, it would usually be a serious incident. The aggrieved party would contact the Adventurers’ Guild and we would post a recovery quest for it.”

“But nothing went up for this?”

“No. Not that I’ve heard. The creation of Soul Essence is regulated by the government, so there is a possibility that whoever lost it is keeping quiet so they don’t draw attention to themselves. I’m not sure what the original purpose of this thing even is. Only the Alchemists’ Guild would know.”

Which didn’t concern us, though we wanted to be kept out of this mess if at all possible.

“Of course. I swear to keep your identity a secret, Fran.”

He wasn’t lying, so we had no choice. The Soul Essence sounded important, and we had every right to be worried about our names getting attached to it.

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

“So about the Soul Essence. Can you look into it?”

"Are you sure? It is very valuable, you know."

"Yeah. I trust you."

Fran nodded as she looked into Eugene's bug eyes. The alchemist's face flushed for a moment, and then he nodded in return. I supposed it wasn't every day that he gained the trust of a child.

Soon, Eugene regained his professional posture and carefully took the Soul Essence into his hands.

"All right. I'll take good care of it."

"Thanks."

That settled the matter. The true identity of the Soul Essence would be revealed sooner or later. Fran shook Eugene's hand, and we left his laboratory.

"Are you telling me that our plans have gone astray?"

"Someone discovered our base of slaving operations."

"What? You mean the one with ties to Raydoss?"

"Yes. I don't know what possessed the Count to do so, but he seems to have ordered the raid himself."

"The Count? I thought he was in our pocket."

"I believe he was swayed by the visitors coming for the Festival of the Moons. Our slaving base has been taken over by the Knight Brigade."

"That's bad."

"The materials we had stashed in our hideout have been stolen as well."

"Even the Cure Turmeric?"

“Yes. It’s all gone.”

“Damn it. Who did it?”

“An adventurer, according to my sources.”

“But those were mercenaries only posing as bandits! Are you telling me a lone adventurer took them all down?”

“They had the misfortune of mugging a high-rank adventurer, I suppose. Our mercenaries were completely wiped out.”

“That’s troubling... Any chance of our plans getting back on track?”

“Our chances are slim... The Cure Turmeric was vital.”

“Can’t we substitute it for something else?”

“No. Not when we’re this pressed for time. Additional research would take too long. Our plans have already been set in motion.”

“Right. We’ll have to make do with our reserves.”

“Indeed. All that’s left is the matter of the ritual.”

“Leave that to me. Preparations might be difficult, but I’ll have it arranged.”

“Please.”

“We will need that girl soon.”

“Right. The girl. Something came up.”

“But we settled the orphanage’s debt. That was the deal.”

“His precious little brother went berserk. It threw a wrench in the works.”

“I thought the plan was to pay off his debt in exchange for the girl?”

“Yes, but he seems to want the girl’s secret soup recipe, and now he’s withholding her.”

“Soup?! The people of this town, I swear...”

“He doesn’t know how much of a mess he’s making of our plans.”

“We have a few days left. We need to settle it before then.”

“I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

Chapter 3: Festival Night

We discussed our next move as we left the Adventurers' Guild.

We'll go to the Lucille Trade Association to sell our - materials. Then let's check out the kitchen Rengill mentioned.

"Sure."

There's an orphanage on the way, so let's drop by and say hi.

"What for?"

I hear they're one of the favorites in the contest.

"But it's not like we can eat for free just by dropping in."

True.

From what I heard, competing stalls didn't veer too far from their base of operations. If the Dragonhead were competing, they would sell their food outside their main store. It followed that whatever the orphanage was selling would be sold outside the orphanage itself. It made for a shorter supply route, and they could leverage whatever popularity they had from the year before. We might as well see what our rivals were up to, especially when it was on the way to the trade association.

So we headed to the orphanage, expecting to exchange friendly greetings with whoever was there. But things didn't turn out as we hoped.

"Yaaah!"

“Waaaah!”

“Get that woman out here!”

Instead of a warm welcome, we heard the terrified cries of children and the angry voice of a man.

The commotion came from within the orphanage walls. It was the opposite of tranquil. We sneaked closer to the building, curious to see what was going on.

“I think you gave me the wrong recipe.”

The thug, sporting an appropriately thuggish mohawk, was waving around a small piece of paper. The object of his threats was a middle-aged woman in a plain old habit. She seemed slim, almost haggardly so. The children were cowering behind her.

“B-but it *is* the right recipe. You promised you would leave us alone when I gave it to you.”

“I think I remember asking for your prize-winning soup recipe. Am I wrong?”

“I-I’m telling you, I already gave it to you.”

It didn’t sound like ordinary money trouble. The thug said something about a recipe. Could this be linked to the cooking contest?

“You expect me to believe that? This recipe’s all ‘a dash of this’ and ‘a splash of that’?”

“Oh, but I don’t usually measure when I cook...”

“Are you serious?! How could Garbage Soup have possibly passed the preliminaries?! ”

“I promise you, I don’t measure when I cook!”

The man held the orphanage’s famed soup recipe in his hand. He’d somehow managed to obtained it, albeit through devious means. But apparently it was incomplete. From his complaints, the recipe was too vague to be useful.

However, the woman was telling the truth. She never measured an ounce of salt when she cooked, and yet she finished fourth place in last year's contest. It sounded impossible.

With a quick Identify, I found that the woman, Io, was quite spectacular. Cooking 9, Enhanced Taste Buds, Blessing of the Food God. With skills like those, she was literally exalted.

Her lack of precision was probably because she only used what was right for each particular batch. She had the recipe engraved into her subconscious and could cook entirely by intuition. That way, she could draw out the best flavors of any ingredient and make prize-winning food using even the cheapest vegetables.

The man didn't know what she was talking about.

"Stop talking nonsense!"

"Eeek!"

Yeah, I figured.

Teacher, I'm going in.

Don't go too crazy, now.

If Fran went overboard, it might cause trouble for the orphanage.

Okay.

She leapt into action, silently closing in on the man. He had no idea she was right behind him.

"This recipe won't cut it, you hear me?! You're gonna have to give us something else. Bring out Charlotte—hurk!"

Fran's kick landed squarely in the back of the thug's head. His eyes rolled back, and he dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Excuse me, Fran, what happened to “not going too crazy”?

What? He’s not dead. I didn’t even cut him.

I guess that was her idea of “not going crazy.” Well, the guy was still in one piece, at least. Might as well let him take a nap.

“Huh? What?”

“Are you okay?” Fran asked Io, who was trying to work out what had just happened.

“Y-yes. Somehow... But is he all right?”

Io approached the man with genuine worry, although she didn’t go so far as to kneel by his side. The man’s unconscious face scared her. She didn’t have the stomach for it.

“O-oh dear, what shall we do? He doesn’t look well at all...”

“Don’t worry. He’s not dead.”

As they spoke, Jet fenced off the children. They were scared of him at first, and the most fearful even broke into tears. But the direwolf rolled over and showed his belly in a show of submission, and soon enough the kids were playing with him.

Io was too frazzled to have a conversation, but we came to understand her situation after a few minutes of questioning.

In the recent years, the Bulbola orphanage had stopped receiving funding from the Count and was forced to raise money on its own. The orphanage wasn’t rolling in dough, so they were thankful for everything they got. The caretakers took the Count to court, since they never received official documents stopping their funding, but their efforts were for naught. However, there were still people eager to help them.

A merchant came one day to offer a helping hand and lent them money at a very low rate. It looked like a great deal, but...

“The due date was awfully harsh. There was no way I could make 300,000G in two months. I wanted to ask him to wait longer, but the man disappeared.”

“Huh. You don’t know where he is?”

“Not a clue. Our caretaker has looked everywhere for him, but we can’t seem to find him. He’s not registered under any trade associations, either.”

The loan felt fishy to me. It sounded like a scam: lending money to those in need and then insisting they repay it tenfold. When the debtor inevitably failed to pay, the fraudster would take collateral as payment.

The strange part of this story was that the debt collector seemed to be demanding a recipe for soup. I assumed the deed to the orphanage was at stake.

“And that thug’s one of the merchant’s lackeys?”

“Yes. He wanted the recipe for my soup, since I couldn’t make payment.”

Was this the merchant’s way of cheating the contest? He’d sure gone out of his way to cheat if he spent 300,000G on this scam. Then again, I supposed it *would* bring a high return. He must have only wanted the recipe, too. He hadn’t made any threats or demanded that Io drop out altogether.

Suffice to say there was a lot we didn’t understand. We could interrogate the thug for more information, but the orphanage might get into deeper trouble if the loan shark’s lackey came home bruised and battered. We weren’t in the business of making unnecessary enemies of underground organizations, either.

What should we do with him?

Well, we can't leave him lying on the floor. Let's just fool him and send him on his way.

Good thing Fran caught the thug completely by surprise. He hadn't seen the face of his assailant, which left us options. I gave Fran the overview of the little act she could give him when he woke up.

And that's about the gist of it. Can you handle it?

"Hm!"

Break a leg. Not literally.

"All right. Heal."

"Bwuh?"

The goon woke up as soon as we healed him. That settled the first act. Things were going to script so far.

"Are you awake?"

"Huh? What happened..."

Good. He had no idea. We could make up any number of lies, and he would gobble it up like candy.

"You passed out in the middle of a conversation."

"I did?"

"Hm. I'm an adventurer who just happened to be passing. I can use Healing Magic, so I healed you."

That's it. We would convince the man that we had nothing to do with his blackout. In fact, we healed him, so he owed us his life.

"Something hit the back of my head..."

"Must be the pavement. You fell pretty hard."

"Really? Huh. W-well, looks like I owe you one."

"Sudden loss of consciousness is a symptom of a - terrible disease. The fact that you lost it in the middle of a

conversation suggests that it's terminal. You might not have long to live."

"What?"

"Blood will seep out of your every pore, and you'll die screaming and writhing in agony."

Okay, I know I said make him worry about his health, but this is too much. I don't think he's going to buy it.

"R-really? Wh-what should I do?"

But he bought it anyway. Since Fran could use Healing Magic, the man considered her an expert physician.

"Go home and rest for the day."

"Th-that's it?"

"Hm. You'll probably feel better once you lie down."

"I-I see! You heard the doctor! I'll be back soon, don't you worry!"

Still shaken from his supposed faint, the man believed Fran's terrible acting. He threatened the members of the orphanage, and then picked himself off the ground and wandered away.

Jet, follow him.

Hrr.

Hopefully we could learn the identity of our malevolent benefactor. Even if we couldn't, Jet could still learn the scent of the man and his cronies, and could keep his eyes open for them during the contest. If they were fellow contestants, there was a chance that we might become targets of their harassment, too.

Five minutes later.

"Thank you so much for helping us. Are you sure this is all you want?"

"Hm."

Io invited Fran into the orphanage and apologized profusely. There was no way she could ever repay Fran's favor in gold. Instead, she offered her some soup, to which Fran instantly agreed.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry it isn't much..."

Io reluctantly served what was, to her, nothing more than Garbage Soup. Despite the cook's humility, Fran's reaction said a lot about its quality.

"Hm... slurrp..."

How is it?

Fran's eyebrows were furled in vexation.

It's good.

Better than mine?

Hm... This vegetable broth is exquisite. It's a miracle.

I could see why she thought so. Compared to other restaurants, the ingredients in this soup were paltry. Water, leftover vegetables, and salt. That was it. Io didn't even use pepper. Fran asked, just to make sure. The fact that it tasted better than my soup was amazing. This woman might be the greatest chef in all of Bulbola...

"Will you be in the contest?"

"Yes, of course."

"With this soup?"

"Yes. Everyone is so kind. They are willing to buy my soup for 10G because they know of our terrible conditions.

I'm always so thankful. I manage to raise funds for an entire year thanks to this contest."

Io didn't think much of her soup and assumed her customers patronized her out of pity. And perhaps pity was a factor, but soup this good could definitely be sold for more than 1G.

Still, even sold so cheaply, Io's soup was more profitable than our curry bread. I doubted if making a bowl even cost 1G.

She might be our strongest competition...

She didn't place fourth last year out of pity, I knew that much. As Fran slurped her soup, someone barged into the orphanage.

"Is everyone okay?!"

"Big sis!"

"Welcome back!"

The girl was fifteen, maybe sixteen, with silver hair cut to her shoulders. She was pretty, almost ethereal-looking. The kids seemed to know her, so I assumed she must be part of the orphanage.

She was dressed oddly, though. Her white dress was almost see-through, with a single frayed hole for her head. It was held together by a belt tied around her middle. Something like a bikini underneath covered her body, although it was little better than nothing, and her arms and thighs were still exposed. It would've looked obscene, if not for the halo of purity around her. Instead, the outfit made her look like a shrine maiden or priestess. And her agility when she barged through the door suggested that she was no ordinary city girl.

Her strange getup made me think that she might be an adventurer. The metal rings she wore on her waist attracted

my attention. They were half the size of a hula hoop but didn't look like ordinary decorations... Maybe they were ceremonial tools for the festival.

In any case, it was time for an Identify.

Name: Charlotte

Age: 16

Race: Human

Class: Battle Dancer

Level: 30/99

HP: 106; Magic: 198; Strength: 68; Agility: 141

Skill: Dodge 6; Chorus 5; Wind Magic 3; Blink 3; Battle Dance 7; Battle Dance Arts 6; Martial Arts 3; Martial Arts Mastery 4; Dance 8; Water Magic 3; Spirit Manipulation; Mana Manipulation

Unique Skill: Fiend Crusher

Class Skill: Alluring Dance

Title: Battle Priestess, Exorcist

Equipment: Enchanted Steel Battle Rings; Snow Monkey Dance Garb; Pearl Wolf Sandals; Anti-Charm Bracelet; Charm Anklets

Identify revealed some interesting tidbits about the girl. She was apparently a Battle Dancer. I'd never seen that class before. Battle Dance seemed to be her main skill.

Battle Dance: Requirement for dancing in the heat of battle.

Battle Dance Arts: Dance charms opponents and buffs allies.

Fiend Crusher: Greatly multiplies damage to Fiend types. Applies the effect Fiend Seal.

Alluring Dance: Greatly increases the effects of Dance.

I gathered that she was like the standard Dancer class in an RPG, with the addition of direct attacks and the usual slew of support dances. The rings hanging from her waist were not decorations, but weapons.

“Charlotte? What are you doing here?”

“Emma called me. She said they were back.”

One of the kids had gone to her for help. Given her stats, she would've been able to handle the thug. I still wondered who she was, and it looked like the feeling was mutual.

“Uh, who's the girl?”



“She is Fran, an adventurer. She helped us earlier when things were about to get hairy.”

Io told Charlotte how Fran had knocked the thug out cold and tricked him into leaving. Charlotte looked surprised.

“Really? You’re an adventurer?”

“Hm. The name’s Fran. D-Rank.”

“W-wow. I can’t believe you’re a higher rank than me at your age.”

She didn’t seem disbelieving or upset though and promptly accepted Fran’s status as a mid-rank adventurer. Fran was likely in her good graces already for helping the people at the orphanage. Still, it worried me how trusting and friendly both Io and Charlotte were of complete strangers...

“Thank you, Fran. My name is Charlotte.”

“It was no big deal.”

All we did was kick the bastard in the back of the head and lie to him about a terminal disease, after all. In fact, Fran was fortunate, since she got to taste the famous orphanage soup.

“Are you an adventurer, too?”

“Yeah. I’m still in E-Rank, though.”

Charlotte’s support class made it difficult for her to advance despite her high level.

“You’re the guardian of this orphanage?”

“Oh, no. I was brought up here, so I help out from time to time.”

“Charlotte makes money for the orphanage by being an adventurer. She gives it to the other orphans who are no longer here as well, since they’re having a rough time at the

moment... I really wish we didn't have to worry her so much."

Io looked apologetic, but Charlotte simply smiled.

"What are you talking about? I only made it this far because the folks at the orphanage went through the trouble of raising me. This is the least I can do."

"I'm sorry, Charlotte... If only there were something we could do to help ourselves."

"There's no need to apologize, ma'am. I'm only helping because I want to. It's almost time for the contest, so just hang in there. You'll sell a lot of bowls of soup."

"Yes... You're right. I'll do my best."

I was a sucker for this kind of development. I came here with the full intention of learning their weaknesses, but seeing their genuine concern for each other struck me. If I had tear ducts, I would cry.

As the two continued their conversation, one of the smaller girls approached the table. She wanted to clear Fran's empty bowl away. As she did so, I saw that her arms were quite skinny.

The same girl produced a small plate with a single cookie on top of it. She presented it to Fran.

"What's this?"

"My snack for the day. But I want you to have it, lady. Thank you for helping Miss Io."

The freckled girl nibbled on her lower lip as she gave Fran her cookie. She really must've wanted to eat it herself...

Oh, what a good girl! Fran's still the best, but this girl was raised well, too!

"Let's share it, then."

"Okay."

The girl beamed as Fran broke the cookie in half. She was cute, and Fran couldn't help but pat her head.

"Is it good?"

"Yeah!"

Fran was usually on the receiving end of this kind of treatment. She seemed happy to play the part of the older sister for once. Io and Charlotte watched the heartwarming scene with smiles on their faces. But my opinion of the Count was in the pits now. How could he abandon these kind people and cut their funding?! He hadn't seemed to be that kind of person when we broke bread with him... I supposed he was still a member of the aristocracy, and they viewed the lower class as mere numbers.

It would be easy enough for us to appeal to him. As long as Fult and Satya were here, they might be able to pressure the Count into improving the quality of life for the orphans. The problem was that the improvement might only last for as long as we were present. The Count was liable to backslide as soon as we left.

We would definitely bring this up to the Count, but we also needed another way to help the orphanage.

Her, Fran suggested.

Yeah. Let's give her a call.

Hm.

We could send messages across continents from the guild. Contacting Alessa would be a cinch.

"Amanda would do something about this."

A-Rank adventurer, Amanda the Hariti. The famed half-elf adventurer and Protector of Children. She loved kids and single-handedly funded the orphanage in Alessa while still managing to support children all over the world. She would definitely help these people.

Before departing from the orphanage, we left them with the food we'd collected in Alessa and Dars. Grains and potatoes along with dried fish and meats. We'd held on to them for too long anyway and wouldn't be using them in the cooking contest. It wasn't much, but I wanted to help.

"A-are you sure we can have all of this?"

"Thank you so much. We will never forget this."

Io and Charlotte bowed their heads. After the kids saw us off from the orphanage, Fran got started.

Teacher, let's go to the Adventurers' Guild.

Yeah, let's go.

We headed for the guild immediately and asked the receptionist to send a message.

"You'll be sending a message to Alessa. Is that correct?"

"Hm."

"All right, we'll send it off at once. Lucky for you, we have some messenger birds available."

I expected the lady to pull out a magical gadget created for long-distance communication, but it seemed they were still using carrier pigeons. Well, hawk-like monsters, to be specific, so I guess they were carrier hawks.

The hawks could cover a month's journey in a little over a day, which was a testament to their great speed. Upon further inquiry, we found out that the monster was called the Wind Eagle, a creature specialized in high-speed flight.

They weren't that common, though. Even the guild at Bulbola only had two. One of them happened to be free, which was really lucky for us. It was expensive, but we could afford to spend 10,000G. The price was still steep, and I agonized over it a little, thinking maybe it would be better to donate the money to the orphanage itself.

From what I remembered, Amanda couldn't stray too far from Alessa. She was a human deterrent to the kingdom of Raydoss in the north. Even so, we still needed her help. I was sure she had pull with the right people and hoped she would be able to instill a more permanent solution to the orphanage's problems.

So we paid the postage and wrote about our current situation and the awful living conditions of the local orphans. We ended the letter with, "These kids are having a rough time, and we hope you can help them out." We were asking a lot, but Amanda could offer them far greater help than we ever could. We had more on the line than our petty pride: the orphans would still need to eat long after we left Bulbola. We needed all the help we could get.

"Thank you. I will have our hawk deliver it immediately."

"Please do."

That took care of the letter.

"Woof."

Jet, you're back.

Jet returned as soon as we left the Adventurers' Guild. The thug had headed in the opposite direction from the Lucille Trade Association. I had really wanted to prepare for the cooking contest today...but it was too late to turn this boat around.

Fran followed Jet into the city.

I expected him to take us to the slums, so I was quite surprised to find the thug lived in an ordinary residential area.

Here?

"Woof."

Jet took us to a large mansion. The estate was fenced off with a five-meter-high wall to deter onlookers. Its size made me wonder if it belonged to a noble, although the location made me doubt it. What was this building for?

We circled around to the front gate but found no nameplates for identification. And so we asked the neighbors. An adventurer asking about the owner would raise anyone's alarm, but Fran was young enough that people let their guard down around her. We asked questions without raising alarm, and Jet even helped by transforming himself into a puppy for extra cuteness.

If Fran was talking to a man, she would tilt her head and glance shyly up at him. Her act was enough to make the hardest of them melt.

"Hey, mister?"

"Wh-what is it, little girl?"

"I wanna ask you something."

"Sure, of course, what is it? I'll tell you anything you want to know."

I apologize to the men she enticed to sin.

Women were a much more straightforward affair. Her cool expression was more effective against them than any contrived act.

"Say, ma'am?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Who owns that huge mansion over there? A noble?"

"That old thing? Yes, I suppose that is the biggest building around."

"Terrible company, though."

"Oh, yes. Very distressing. I have no idea who owns it, but the company they keep ain't good."

“Really?”

That was surprising. I was sure the local Society of Housewives would know.

“But just between you and me, that place looks like it’s being used by some bad people. They always enter the mansion under the cover of night.”

No wonder the building felt out of place. The fact that the thug came here pretty much confirmed those suspicions.

“Like some kind of secret society?”

“Ha ha, wouldn’t that be the day! I don’t think any secret society would settle down in our part of town. Although I do remember hearing that one of the Count’s carriages was seen entering that place.”

“The Count’s in on this?”

“Who knows? It did have his crest, though. Your guess is as good as mine whether the Count was actually in it.”

We carried on our inquiries, but it didn’t look like anyone knew who the mansion belonged to. However, there were lots rumors about it being used by a crooked bunch. Everyone advised Fran not to go near it, especially at night.

There were people inside, right, Jet?

“Ruff. Arf.”

Jet nodded. There was quite a number inside the mansion.

Well, barging in would be reckless...

We didn’t know how many people were inside or how strong they were. We needed proof. We’d be charged with breaking and entering if we charged through those gates now.

We would have to hold off for another day.

Do you have their scent, Jet?

“Woof.”

Good. Keep an eye out for them.

“Arf, arf!”

We didn’t know when the thug or his boss would come, so the best we could do was be vigilant. For now, we had business at the Lucille Trade Association. I guess we could ask them about the mansion while we were there.

One hour later.

“And that’s all of it.”

“Hm. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Best of luck with the contest.”

We were in front of the condemned restaurant that the Lucille Trade Association had prepared for us. The place still had working stoves and ovens, along with a well in the back. The LTA had people come and clean it periodically, which explained the lack of dust.

Our ingredients were stacked up neatly in a corner. Everything was present and accounted for: spices, vegetables, flour, and oil. There was a lot to account for, too. It nearly filled the whole shop. The LTA had prepared everything we ordered in a little over a day, as expected of a great trade association.

Should I store these?

Yeah, might as well.

The Pocket Dimension meant we could take whatever we needed out of storage, and it came with the added benefit of preserving whatever was in it. Fran proceeded to store everything away there, while the couriers Rengill had employed stared in shock. This little girl was easily storing

away barrels of vegetables and sacks of flour they had had to transport with their own sweat and tears.

Rengill even offered Fran a permanent spot as an employee for the LTA.

The captain knew about the Pocket Dimension, but actually seeing it in action drove home its convenience. It sounded like our Pocket Dimension outclassed even storage spells.

“You can’t store this much with a Space-Time spell?”

“No. The Space-Time mages that I know could only store a third of this.”

Pocket Dimension was a Skill instead of a spell, after all. It was much stronger than most Space-Time spells and came with unique perks. Merchants would die to get a hold of it.

The paper bags we’d use to sell our wares were also - included in the package. Paper was widely used in Bulbola, and even ordinary citizens had access to it. In this world, parchment was used by mages, while laymen used ordinary paper.

The bags looked like the brown paper bags back on Earth, all the way down to their thickness and uneven texture, though I had a sinking feeling that the overall quality was lower.

They came in two sizes: one large enough to hold two curry breads and one large enough to hold six. Cutting the smaller one in half would make it perfect for carrying a single curry bread around town. It would look pretty good, too. Oh, how I hoped our bread would catch on in this world.

We also cut holes at the top of the paper bags for handles, making them easier to carry.

“We have a lot of bags in storage, so feel free to place an additional order if you need it.”

“Sure.”

We asked Rengill about the mansion Jet had discovered, and he seemed to have some idea of the proprietor.

“It might belong to the Ythra Trade Association.”

“Who are they?”

“They are former mercenaries and bandits who employ slaves to do their bidding. A mean bunch, to say the least. They’re not shy about their cruel methods, either.”

Ythra Trade Association. Got it.

“They have ties with the aristocracy and underground associations, so I recommend you have as little to do with them as possible. Even we at Lucille avoid them.”

The Ythra Trade Association sounded more like a mob than merchants.

Rengill handed us the keys to the place before leaving. It was his way of saying the contract was complete.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

We had a kitchen. We had our ingredients. Now, we could get to cooking.

Wait—we still had to register at the Chefs’ Guild. They required each contestant to register their ingredients and submit a sample of their dish.

Let’s make a sample batch for the Chefs’ Guild before we get going.

“Hm. It’s finally time.” Fran clenched her fist, full of motivation. She really was set on making curry a household dish.

We started making our sample batch then. It was easier than I thought, since I already had experience making curry. I prepped the water and filling for each type of curry: sweet, spicy, and very spicy. I used pork, beef, and chicken for the fillings, though it wasn't really pork, beef, and chicken. It was monster meat.

Making bread strong enough to contain the curry was the real challenge. After several failed batches, we finally made one that was satisfactory both in shape and taste.

Okay, that should do it.

I looked at the freshly deep-fried curry bread. It looked about the same as the ones sold in Earth's bakeries.

"Leave the taste test to us, Teacher."

"Woof! Woof, woof!"

I left the breads on a wire rack to cool and drain off excess oil. Fran and Jet, who already had their midday snack, approached them while wagging their tails.

"Hang on. It's still oily. It needs to drain for a little bit."

"Aww."

"Ruff..."

My hungry companions waited right in front of the batch, eager to get a taste. Not that staring at the breads would make them dry any quicker.

The dough of the standard pork curry bread was cooked to golden brown. The spicy beef bread was speckled with red chili. The super spicy chicken was decorated with green herbs that looked like cilantro. In total, I'd made six of each.

After a fifteen-minute wait on the cooling rack, the curry breads were ready to handle and eat. I stored half of the batch away in the Pocket Dimension to submit to the Chefs' Guild and gave the remainder to Fran and Jet.

It's ready now. Here you go.

"Hm!"

"Woof, woof!"

The insatiable duo finished the remaining curry bread as soon as I gave them the go-ahead.

"So good." Fran finished the plain curry bread in three bites.

"Arf, arf."

What do you think?

"I think it's amazing! Curry rice was good, but curry bread is on a whole different level."

"Bark!"

It was a line right out of a cooking manga. I was glad she liked it.

"This one's good, too."

"Woof, woof, woof!"

Jet seemed to like the spicy one more than the plain. He had the tongue for it, I guess.

What do you think, Fran?

"No complaints here."

Fran didn't have any trouble with the spicy version, but what about the super spicy bread?

"Hot. But good. But hot."

"Woof! Woof, woof, arf!"

I guess regular spice was as far as Fran could go. Very spicy was a huge hit with our direwolf, though.

How much of each should we make? Very spicy was definitely an acquired taste... I would go with forty percent regular, forty percent spicy, and twenty percent very spicy.

How's that Cure Turmeric?

"Hm... I can't tell."

"Arf."

I used it in all of my breads. I added it for depth of flavor, but apparently it had the secondary effect of healing. Properly prepared, it should have the same effect as a status ailment curing potion.

I had zero knowledge of magical pharmacy, but Cure Turmeric was as magical as it was tasty. My Cooking skill kicked in, and I was able to prep it without a problem. It should be enough to trigger a cleansing effect in the body, but it was difficult to observe in healthy consumers. I didn't mind, since I wasn't treating it as a cure to begin with.

Looks like we're good on the taste front. Let's go to the Chefs' Guild.

"Sure."

Thirty minutes later, we'd successfully submitted our curry bread to the guild. Not that much could go wrong, since all we needed to do was give them the sample and the recipe.

Let's head back and get prepared.

"Hm."

I planned to make a huge batch of curry bread and store it in the Pocket Dimension. We were going to have to spend the entire night making it. Whatever we cooked would be a ploy to attract more customers. The bulk of our stock would be made in advance in an effort to keep downtime low and sales high. Any leftovers would go to Fran and Jet.

"Fran! There you are." Colbert greeted us in the lobby of the Chefs' Guild.

"Colbert? What are you doing here?"

"I've been looking for you! You said you planned to come here today, so I decided to wait. It's almost time for the contest, and I wondered if you needed any help?"
Colbert huffed as he approached us. He was really into this contest. "Anything at all, really! I just want to help. It's not like I want to have a taste of your master's cooking or anything!"

So that was his plan. Well, if he really wanted to help, I wasn't going to stop him. I'd treat him to as much as he wanted, in fact.

Teacher?

He seems honest enough. Ask him if he knows any criers.

I was going to ask Rengill for recommendations, but having adventurers around meant that they could double as our bodyguards.

"We're looking for a crier for our food stall. We need someone to be the cashier and do basic food prep, too. Three of them if possible."

"You got it! I'll get a party ready by tomorrow!"

"We'll be generous with our pay."

"All the better. I'll get you the best in human resources!"

That should cover the staff. We had two days left until the contest, and things were going as planned.

You're helping too, Fran.

"Hm. I'll do my best."

Jet, you're our watchdog.

“Bark!”

We returned to our base of operations and got to work on preparations.

First were the spices. I organized them by the type of bread I’d need them for. This would be instrumental in creating consistently delicious bread. Our spice blend needed to be just right.

Jet, stop sniffing the spice bowls. Your breath is enough to blow them away! Oh no, now Fran’s sneezing from the spices in the air! Anyway, I’ll stay in sword form and organize the spices now.

“Hm.”

“Arf...”

I asked Fran to prep the rest of the ingredients.

“You got it.”

“Ruff?”

There’s not really anything you can do, Jet.

“Arf, arf...”

You can give me puppy dog eyes all you want, but them’s the facts.

“Woof, woof!”

He was really energetic today.

“Bark...!”

Standing on your hind legs isn’t going to help...

His legs were shaking now, too. I was worried he’d fall over something. Jet really wanted to help, and I wondered if there was something he could do. He’d have to use either his front paws or his mouth. Maybe he could use his mouth to hold on to something...

Oh, I know. You can help us make butter.

“Arf?”

Hang on.

I took out a barrel of monster milk from the Pocket Dimension. We’d ordered a few barrels of the stuff from Rengill. It was expensive, but the captain said it was worth every penny. Drinking the milk by itself was good, but that wasn’t all it could do. Its composition meant it could be turned into butter easier than regular milk.

I was going to use magic to save time but decided to delegate to Jet instead. I asked him to turn himself into his former size.

Say “aah,” Jet.

“Aarf...?”

I placed a barrel in his gaping maw.

Whatever you do, don’t bite into it. It’s just a wooden barrel and you might get splinters.

“Ruff.”

All right, now I want you to shake that barrel as hard as you can.

“A-arf?”

You’re the one who said you wanted to help. Now, get shaking, boy!

“W-woof!”

Jet started to headbang on my mark. At his rate, we’d have butter within the hour. I went back to cooking and lost myself in it. Next thing I knew, it was getting dark. How time flies when you’re in the zone.

Jet was curled up in a corner after an hour of non-stop headbanging. Even a direwolf couldn’t keep his head

straight after that.

The sun was almost fully set now.

Fran, how about we take a break and have a look around the festival? The Festival of the Moons started when night fell.

“Hm. Food stalls.”

Sure, but I think there's a parade, too.

“Yeah. Lots of good food.”

Well, whatever makes you happy.

That was what mattered most.

“Come on, Jet.”

“A-arf...”

Jet staggered as he followed Fran out the back door. Even in his dazed state, he was still set on protecting his master. He truly deserved the title “Beastman’s Best Friend.” Not that it actually popped up on his status sheet.

“So many people.”

“Woof.”

The stars were out, but there were as many people as during the afternoon. No, there were probably more. The streets were lit up and lively tonight, and the silence of midnight was interrupted by laughter. Food stalls lined either side of the street, reminding me of the festivals back on Earth, albeit with a lack of chocolate-covered bananas, hot dogs, and fried noodles. Instead, they sold skewers of grilled and salted fish, mystery meat, and the tongue of some unknown creature. Things I could never find back on Earth.

It sure is lively tonight.

“Hm. Munch, munch.”

What's that you're eating?

"Grilled squid thing."

"Munch, munch."

Is that a ham hock, Jet? You sure found your appetite quick. We haven't even been out that long.

And here I thought Jet was still reeling from churning the butter.

"The good food is calling us."

"Woof."

Jet's appetite overpowered his drowsiness. They wandered from stall to stall, letting their stomachs lead the way. Eventually, we reached the square and heard the sound of music. It sounded western and quite unlike anything I'd heard at Japanese shrine festivals. The rhythm sounded somewhat Latin.

We walked to the source and found the band. I recognized something that looked like a violin and a bagpipe among the unique instruments.

"This festival's a lot of fun."

"Woof!"

As we took in the atmosphere, a roar of applause boomed through the crowd.

Sounds like there's something coming this way.

"It's huge."

Something was making its way along the main road, and the crowd parted to watch.

Looks like a parade float. Who's that on it?

"Priestess."

Ooh. Yeah, I guess her outfit does look quite holy.

A quick Identify revealed her class was Oracle. I wondered if she could really hear the voices of the gods. They were proven beings in this world, after all.

The float was headed to the temple square, where the oracle would offer a dance and a prayer to the gods. We would've followed her, but the crowd became too thick to navigate. Everyone wanted to see the ceremony.

Fran, let's get to higher ground.

“Hm.”

We decided to use our unfair advantage to get special seats.

We separated from the crowd and leapt to the roof of a nearby house. We could take the rooftops all the way to the temple.

Fran carried on using Air Hike, sometimes jumping from a conveniently planted tree, and eventually up onto a high spire right next to the temple where the ceremony would take place. We had a perfect view of the temple square.

The multitude of people pushed and shoved below, reminding me of the fully packed trains on Earth. We would've been stuck there if we'd gone on foot... Fran wouldn't have been able to see a thing. Good thing we cheated a little.

I returned my gaze to the main street and saw that the float had almost arrived. Perfect timing.

An altar and stage were set up especially in the temple square. We watched the spectacle from our spire as the float stopped in front of the temple.

They're here.

“Hm.”

The priestess came down from the float, singing prayers to her god.

Her divine song had a calming effect on a crowd, and for a moment, the characteristic silence of midnight - returned. The band serenaded her, now with the Japanese sounds of a flute and *koto*.

Her prayers reached their crescendo, and the priestess broke out into a dance. The other women who joined her were all slightly older than Fran and looked far more delicate. Their short silver hair fluttered in the night wind.

"Is that Charlotte?"

Didn't think we'd see her here...

Charlotte, the girl from the orphanage, was among them. Her kind expression had been replaced with a serious mask as she danced.

"She's so pretty."

Yeah.

We would've been content spending the rest of the night watching the ceremony, but our attention drifted elsewhere.

"Something...feels off."

Yeah. Looks like tourists aren't the only ones in the audience.

We sensed something dangerous from one of the alleyways, which linked the temple square to the city slums. There were people there. They were ready to fight, and they had an intense hatred of Charlotte.

The alleyway was behind the temple and otherwise - deserted. It would be easy for the assailants to sneak up to the stage and attack her.

Teacher.

I know. We can't let this one slide.

I'm going in!

Fran leapt into action before we decided on a plan of attack.

Wait! The festival's still going on, so don't cause too much of a scene!

Got it.

Fran used Air Hike to quietly circle around. There were five of them, all men, and all capable of handling themselves in a fight.

I Identified them. Their leader, Boran, was pretty strong. If he were a registered adventurer, he'd be a D-Rank. He bore the title Sadist and could use both Sword Arts and Magic. I doubted he was one of the good guys.

The rest of his team were cut from the same cloth. Their skills and titles revealed them as members of the underground.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“When did you—?!”

The man jumped back at Fran’s sudden appearance. He sighed in relief when he saw she was nothing more than a little girl.

“Get outta here, kid. You don’t wanna be around for this.”

“Don’t blame us if you start crying.”

“Are you in a hurry?” Fran asked. “Why? Are you part of the ceremony?”

The man clicked his tongue. “Shut it!” he yelled, losing his patience. “You better stop talking if you know what’s good for you.”

“What are you going to do? Are you a bad man?”

Fran didn’t miss a beat. You could see the man’s veins pulse with anger as he glared at her. He reached out to grab her, no longer caring about witnesses. Fran dodged it easily with a quick backstep; any other child wouldn’t have been as fortunate.

“What is this kid?!”

As the man got ready to activate another Skill, Boran stepped in to put him back in line.

“Leave her! We’re running out of time! The dance is almost over!”

“S-sorry, boss.”

“This kid isn’t the reason why we’re here. Focus on the target!”

“Yes, boss!”

Now, who was their target? I was sure a few minutes of interrogation would answer that question.

“Gyaa!”

“Guaah!”

The men were about to proceed when two of them suddenly fell to the ground. They held their legs and writhed in agony.

“Wh-what happened? Hey—!”

“Th-there’s something here!”

Jet. The festival lights deprived him of the shadows he needed, but he could still hide far more easily than he could under the midday sun. The lights failed to reach the alleyway, making it no brighter than an average night. Lacking Night Vision, the men couldn’t see what was biting their ankles.

Remaining hidden, Jet continued his ambush. They didn't know what hit them. Boran, already wincing on the ground, continued glaring at Fran. He suspected she was the source of the attack despite knowing that was impossible. He took his eyes off her and scanned his surroundings. He really was an elite soldier to keep a cool head in a situation like this.

"Run away, gyaa!"

"Oof!"

The five men were helpless against Jet's ambush, and he locked them in place. He bit their ankles from the shadows, and they all rolled around in pain. They'd had the awful luck of encountering a shadow-manipulating wolf. This wolf in particular was still annoyed from churning butter, and I suspected he was taking his frustrations out on them.

Now, let's get some answers from... Wait.

I stopped, sensing more people coming, but tension soon dissolved into relief as three town guards rushed into the alleyway.

They were on routine patrol when they heard the agonized screams of the gang.

"Hey! What's going on in there?!"

"You all right?!"

"What happened here?!"

Well, this was an unwanted interference. We couldn't interrogate the men with these guards around. Now that the thugs were incapacitated, the guards would probably arrest them. Worst of all, we might get implicated, too. I doubted the writhing hoodlums would say that Fran had nothing to do with it. We couldn't get involved.

"What on earth... Did you see anything, little girl?" the guard asked.

I don't think he suspected Fran of any crimes, but he was cautious of her.

"I came here to watch the festival. Then I overheard these guys saying they were going to kidnap someone."

"Is that so? What happened to these guys then?"

"I don't know. They just started falling on their faces."

"And...you had nothing to do with it?"

"Nope."

He didn't look satisfied with that. In fact, he became more suspicious. I could tell from the guard's tone of voice that he'd gone from treating Fran as an innocent onlooker to a reasonable suspect. His gaze sharpened.

"Surely you must've seen something."

"It was too dark to see anything."

"Now, miss—"

"Hey!"

One of his friends stopped him before he could press Fran further.

I felt like I'd seen this one before. He huddled with his friends and whispered something to them with a most grave look on his face.

"I've seen this girl before."

"What? You mean she's the Count's—"

"She has ties to the Phyllians?!"

And then I remembered. Our friend was among the first people we met when we were headed to the Count's mansion.

"W-we deeply apologize for taking up your time, ma'am!"

“Thank you for your cooperation!”

The guards immediately changed their tune. To them, Fran was friends with royalty, and getting in her way would spell disaster for their careers. To that end, she was not to be bothered with any formal statements or other such bothersome protocol. The color drained from the face of the guard that was questioning her. I kind of felt sorry for the guy.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Indeed you didn’t, ma’am!”

Any attempt at clarification fell on deaf ears. Well, at least we prevented this from turning into a full-blown incident.

“Can I go now?”

“Let her through!”

“Thanks.”

We avoided wasting any more time, but we needed to warn them before we went on our way.

“Those guys are really strong. You better call for backup.”

“Yes, ma’am! Thank you for warning us!”

“Go on, blow that whistle.”

The thugs wouldn’t be able to get away now. The guards were well trained, but they were outranked both in strength and number.

Still, I wondered what the thugs wanted. Were they really just here to interrupt the festivities? Or did they have something bigger in mind? Well, it was up to the boys and girls at the Knight Brigade to figure that out.

“They’re still going.”

Looks like we're just in time for the ending.

We returned to our vantage point and watched Charlotte dance. The beat had gotten faster, and her movements were more intense now. The performance was nearing its end.

“Charlotte’s doing great...”

Yeah.

She entranced us with her dance, and we silently watched to its conclusion. Her body looked like it was glowing with light. Mana surged through her, perhaps as a part of the ritual. Soft blue light further increased her divine aura. She looked like a goddess descended to earth. Even the beads of sweat flicked off of her hair were divine.

Fran snuggled up to Jet and got comfortable, losing herself in Charlotte’s performance.

I joined Fran in silence, and we watched the ritual all the way to its end.

Shrine bells chimed through the square, and Charlotte struck a pose, thrusting one hand in the air and touching her face with the other.

The blue light enveloping her flashed, illuminating the entire stage. It was magical, but that wasn’t all. The pallid light surrounding the stage was charged with divine energy. So much so that it moved the onlookers to tears of reverence.

The ritual was both an offering to the gods and a way to use mana to cleanse the area of evil spirits. I assumed it only worked on the weaker spirits, but that made me wonder why the men from earlier had wanted to interrupt it.

“It’s over.”

That sure was pretty.

“Charlotte was really pretty,” Fran said, looking both sad and satisfied.

I was glad she enjoyed it.

All right, let’s head back and get to cooking again.

“Yeah!”

It was a well-deserved change of pace after all our - adventuring. Recharged, we returned to our kitchen— stopping at whatever food stall Fran wanted to try along the way.

I’m going to have to kick it into high gear. You and Jet can go to bed if you’re tired. I’ll take care of the rest.

I was going to pull an all-nighter tonight. We’d told Sebastian that we would either be back late or not at all, so we wouldn’t worry our hosts. I doubted Fran and Jet would mind if we stayed here for the rest of our trip. We had sleeping bags stowed in our Pocket Dimension, so all we needed was a roof over our heads.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help.”

“Woof.”

You sure? Well, I guess I’ll need your help then.

“You got it!”

Watching the festivities had refreshed my companions despite the late hour.

You can continue prepping the vegetables, Fran.

“Got it.”

Jet...you’re on butter duty again.

“A-arf...”

I floated him another barrel of monster milk. It was time for him to channel his inner metalhead again. We should have enough now to make a whole lot of curry bread. Butter

by itself was a luxury, and the monster butter in the market was expensive. We saved a lot of money making our own. Unsalted, it tasted quite fresh and delicious.

Jet held the barrel in his jaws with a look of slight exasperation and then moved to a part of the shop which had more headspace. He was going to need it.

Which leaves me to handle the dough making.

What's going on? My head feels like it's floating in - nothingness. I was making curry bread and then...

And then what?

My short-term memory was fogged over.

Darkness was all around me. Infinite and impenetrable darkness.

Strange. Did my sight bug out on me? Was I damaged? Which part of me was tied to my sight anyway? I think I would've noticed if parts of my body were broken.

As I pondered my current situation, a ray of light finally punched a hole through the darkness. Nothing was wrong with my vision after all, and I let out a sigh of relief. Then again, I still had no idea where I was. That was definitely a cause for concern.

I was within a ten-meter-long gray box made of neither stone nor wood.

The mysterious structure lacked any entry point. How did I get in here?

As I searched the walls for anything familiar, I saw a figure about ten meters away. A middle-aged man. His hair was slicked back, and he was wearing long, flowing robes. He looked lean, but I could tell there was muscle underneath. His eyes were sharp and narrow, and his lips set

in a terrifying nihilistic grin. Long canines showed between his lips, adding a hint of ferocity. He might have been a gentleman, but he was still a beastman underneath. The apparent contradiction added to his mystery.

Yet, despite his presence, I couldn't feel his aura. He was like a phantasm. I tried to get closer so I could get a better look...

I can't move.

My body had stiffened. The man didn't approach me, either.

Who are you?

The man didn't answer, but opened and closed his hands in front of his mouth.

Why are you gesturing to me?

“—”

What's that? I can't hear you.

“—”

You can't talk?

That seemed to be the correct answer. He pointed, as if commanding me. He still had something to tell me, though, and resumed his charade.

At least I wasn't getting reincarnated again. I watched the man's movements, trying to make sense of them. He used both his hands to form an upside down triangle in the air. Then, he moved his hands back and forth.

Is it an upside-down pyramid?

“—”

The man shook his head. I guess that wasn't it. I really couldn't tell.

Sensing my confusion, he gestured again. He shifted his face to an idiotic expression, half-opened his mouth, and stuck both his arms forward. Then, he slowly shuffled his way towards me.

This was easy enough.

Zombie?

He gave me a thumbs up.

The man repeated the zombie gesture along with the upside-down triangle. The subject of zombies reminded me of the dungeon on the floating island.

Hey, wait a second... Is that upside down triangle supposed to be the floating island?

“—”

He gave me another thumbs up.

What next?

The man dropped into a stance and put his hands next to his hips. Balling them up into fists, he concentrated until he shook. His body radiated with the faint glow of mana.

Kaio-ken?

“—”

Well, I didn't expect him to know that move anyway.
The man repeated the gesture.

Hmm... You're charging up for a big attack?

I was getting closer now, though I hadn't quite hit the mark. The man snapped his fingers in a show of delighted frustration.

You're firing a charged-up attack?

The man pointed at me. I was getting warmer.
A charged-up attack on the floating island?

Oh, Unleash Potential!

This time, he gave me two thumbs up. He took his right hand to his mouth and opened and closed it, as if mimicking moving lips.

A conversation during Unleash Potential?

The Lich?

He made a cross with his arms. Wrong answer.

Who else did I talk to during Unleash Potential? There was the Lich and then...the P.A.?

Another X.

There was that mysterious male voice. Oh, you're the one who told me about the P.A.!

The man nodded. He bowed his head regretfully, as if apologizing. Then, he went back to miming talking lips. He repeated this for a while. He was probably apologizing for what he said back then... I tried to recall our conversation.

Hey, who are you?

Well, I was planning to reveal my identity to you later down the road, but...we're scheduled to meet in less than a month, you know. At least, our minds will.

Aww, come on. There's no need to put on airs now. You could just tell me now, and it'll be just as good.

You're taking this very much in stride...

It's because you don't seem like a stranger to me.

All right, then. I'll tell you. My name is—

That was where our conversation ended. The fact that he was apologizing now must mean...

You're sorry that you won't be able to make our meeting?

Another nod.

You wanted to introduce yourself, but it's hard because you can't talk?

More nodding.

The man in front of me was the owner of the voice that spoke to me from time to time. But then, why couldn't he talk today?

The man dropped into his Unleash Potential pose and pointed at himself, then got on his knees and stuck out his tongue like he was moaning.

Is it because of Unleash Potential?

Using Unleash Potential had the same effect on this man as on the P.A.

He posed like he was swinging a sword and...now his arm was up in what looked like the Snake Fist pose? He extended his arms, put them together, and then opened them like a snake's mouth. The mimed snake looked like it was blasting something from its mouth.

Sword, snake, blast...?

“—”

The man pointed to the butt of his sword. The hilt? The snake came out of the sword's hilt and wrapped around it.

I get it! It was that fight with Valuza! You said you would seal the energy that I released that day...!

“—”

That blast of energy, and Unleash Potential, had taken this man's speech.

Are you inside of me?

He nodded.

Are you the voice I heard on the first day of my reincarnation?

He nodded.

I knew it. Now, there was something I absolutely needed to ask.

Who are you?

The question had been on my mind since I got here.

He heaved a sigh and shook his head. Explaining himself was going to be difficult.

Will we meet again?

The man pointed up, and I followed his gaze. The ceiling had disappeared, and the moon was hanging above me.

The moon...?

Why now?

I recalled that our first conversation was on my first day of reincarnation, before the episode with Unleash Potential. That meant it was around the time of the last Festival of the Moons. And now the festival had come again.

Does it have something to do with the Festival of the Moons?

He nodded.

I was right. Which meant—

Will we meet again at the next one?

The man grinned, and then stuck up his thumb.

He was fading now, and I was sad that it was over so fast.

Wait, I still have questions!

The man replied with another bow of apology. Then, he vanished. Our time had run out.

Just when we're getting to the good part!

And with that final yell...

Huh...

Uhh, what happened?

My sight cleared along with my thoughts.

I looked around and found that I was still in the kitchen. There was unfinished curry bread in front of me.

Was that a dream? I didn't know a sword could dream. I didn't need sleep—couldn't, in fact, even if I wanted to. Did I daydream then? It felt like something similar had happened in the past...

I checked the clock. Not a single minute had gone by. I felt like I had been spirited away.

Was I really dreaming...?

Despite my doubts, I was sure my vision was no dream. That man existed, and we'd actually had that conversation via charades.

The next Festival of the Moons is in three months. I hope you'll feel like talking by then, mister.

He said he was inside me. I was sure that he could hear.

“I heard something went wrong with our plans again. What is going on?”

“I'd like to know myself. I sent one of the Ythra thugs over to the orphanage, but he came back spouting nonsense.”

“What kind of nonsense?”

“He said he was suffering from a deadly disease, and it was his last day on earth. I knocked some sense into him, though.”

“And then? Don’t tell me that was enough to put a stop to all our plans.”

“Of course not. But then something happened during the ritual. The mercenaries haven’t returned.”

“Mercenaries? You mean my men?”

“Yes. You said I could use them however I saw fit, did you not? So I obliged. I think his name was Boran.”

“Ah, Boran. He’s strong, but he also has a good head on his shoulders. He has accomplished more than all my other subordinates. You’re saying he failed?”

“He hasn’t reported back, that’s for sure.”

“Something’s going on out there.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“Boran should have no trouble dealing with the city guards and low-rank adventurers. There has to be someone else involved...”

“Indeed. Either way, we were unable to either kidnap Charlotte or stop the Fiend Crusher ritual. The slum folk who consumed the Fiend Water are mostly cleansed of its effects now.”

“Damn it. Could things get any worse?”

“Don’t go about tempting fate. Our Cure Turmeric was stolen, Charlotte got away, the people have been purified...”

“It’s like someone knows our plans... Or is it coincidence?”

“I don’t know… It would appear our plans are being scuttled by someone who knows of them. Actually, the Chimera Soul I had delivered to the Ythra Trade Association was stolen the other day.”

“Really?”

“I asked my contact, since delivery was taking too long. Apparently, it was sent with the Cure Turmeric.”

“You mean to say that whoever stole the Cure Turmeric also stole the Chimera Soul?”

“Most likely. Those fools at Ythra are saying they’ll make it up to me and find another bottle…”

“One that can match the Soul Essence of a Chimera? I doubt it. That thing’s worth millions—no, even more. You destroyed everything else when you left the Raydossian Alchemist Guild.”

“I know. This is why I detest working with laymen. I made it very clear that I wanted it found, but I doubt if they’ll have any luck.”

“We’ll have to reformulate our plans.”

“We have no other choice.”

“How I wish these strange occurrences would stop.”

Chapter 4: Underbelly

A day had passed since the main event, but the Festival of the Moons was just beginning.

With all the ritual prayers now offered to the gods, the people were now free to enjoy themselves. The city was bustling with events, including a beauty pageant open to both men and women—not that Fran was interested.

We labored with our cooking late into the night and went straight to the Adventurers' Guild in the morning. There was someone we were looking for.

"Morning, Fran. I got you your salesgirl hopefuls like I promised."

Colbert was going to introduce us to people who could help run our stall. The three applicants, all girls, stood behind him.

"Hello."

"Sup."

"Hey."

None of them condescended to Fran, despite her tender age. After all, she was going to be their employer, so they were professional enough to bow their heads. The girls seemed familiar somehow.

"These are the Crimson Maidens, a D-Rank party."

"We meet again."

It was the adventuring party we rescued from bandits on our way home from the Crystal Cage. The Crimson Maidens turned out to be a D-Rank party. Adventurer

ranking system was split into solo and party, and Fran fell under the solo category. Her rank indicated her strength as an individual. Party rank, on the other hand, reflected the combined strength of the party's members. Combined, these three had the capabilities of a D-Rank adventurer. They had well-balanced frontline and backline setups, and a good reputation for clearing missions.

What surprised me most were all their commerce--related skills. You didn't see much of that among adventurers.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Judith, the leader," a woman with long blue hair said, shaking Fran's hand. "My father was a street peddler, and he used to drag me everywhere with him when I was a kid. That's where I learned Cooking and Trade."

Her earliest memories were of watching her father hawk his wares. She must've picked up Cooking at some point in their travels. Judith was as pretty as she was polite. Having her run the register would be enough to bring in the customers.

"I'm Maya. I do chores for the party." A girl with short red hair bowed her head. Her relaxed pace was at odds with her roguish appearance. She explained that she managed the party's cooking, equipment, and food while they were in a dungeon. Skill-wise, she was a jack-of-all-trades and master of none, but she had Negotiate, Calculate, and Cooking, which was perfect for us. She was beautiful, too. She would do great as a salesgirl.

"Lydia," said the last girl.

She looked quite like Fran. Black hair, pale skin, blank expression. Her hair flowed all the way to her waist, but she was similar to Fran in all other aspects. Although it went without saying that Fran was much cuter.

“...”

“...”

Lydia and Fran stared at each other. Neither of their faces moved, and an odd air flowed around them.

“...”

Fran tilted her head to the side.

Lydia dropped to all fours and hung her head. “I lost...!”

“Lydia, what are you doing?”

Judith was surprised at her friend’s sudden collapse.

“She has me beat. She’s not making up her expression, she really *is* that cool!”

“I see...”

“And if the rumors of the Swordceress are true, then she’s already a better swordsman than me *and* has mastered Flame Magic. She’s so young...”

She knew a lot about Fran. Then again, maybe this was a side effect of fame. I didn’t know whether it was good or bad...

“I’m infinitely inferior to her. The only thing differentiating us is the length of our hair.”

“Come on now, you’re much taller than she is.”

“The Swordceress is still growing. It won’t take long for her to surpass my height.”

“O-kay, maybe that’s true. But you have the God of Wisdom’s Blessing, don’t you? It’s the name of a Skill that she has,” Judith explained as she consoled her comrade.

The Skill allowed Lydia to increase Magic and Knowledge-type skills faster. A useful skill for any adventurer. Lydia also possessed a skill called Magic Circle, which allowed her to create amulets. Very interesting.

"She has Calculate because it's a prerequisite for Magic Circle. She doesn't have Cooking, but she does have Compounding."

"I-I'll work really hard, I promise!"

"Me too."

We'd caught a glimpse of their work ethic during the caravan incident. Colbert was willing to vouch for them, too. They were competent, and I couldn't have asked for better candidates.

We hired them and got right down to negotiating rates. Unfortunately, we were ignorant of the going rates, but Colbert clarified for us. His B-Rank wasn't just for show.

Between us, we decided that meals would be included for the duration of their employment, along with a payment of 10,000G each. At 30,000G, I wondered if the price was too low, but there wasn't much danger involved in being a salesgirl. On the contrary, 30,000G was plenty.

We were used to hunting monsters above our Adventurer Rank, after all. Our financial values were slightly dulled because of it. The girls' main motivation was to get three days' worth of free food. It would seem that Colbert had informed them about the great dishes Fran's master was capable of. I was thankful, just as long as they did their jobs.

"For Colbert to give you such a rave review—we must try it."

"It's gonna be good. I know it."

"Can't wait."

"Ugh. I'm so jealous..." Colbert's eyes turned green with envy. "Say...you wouldn't happen to have any other slots open, would you?" the gourmet pugilist asked.

I wasn't sure. I didn't have anything in particular that we needed help with...

“I’m the one offering help, so think of it as volunteer work. No pay required. Just let me eat some of your master’s cooking.”

He was so driven by his appetite that he reminded me of my two travelling companions. We’d never had a B-Rank in our midst before, so I supposed we could let him handle whatever chores came up.

“If you don’t mind working on chores, sure.”

“R-really? Yes!”

“We look forward to working for you.”

“See you tomorrow!”

Now we had a team of four helpers for our food stall.

We went back to preparing for the contest as soon as we returned from the guild. We were at the final stages, now. The outside of the curry bread was prepared, as well as the filling, so all we needed to do was wrap and fry them. It would be our most difficult step.

Fran couldn’t concentrate on anything that took too long, so I was alone on this one. The bread bubbled and crackled as it fried to a golden brown.

Wow, it’s already dark out. I didn’t even notice.

I had been concentrating since mid-morning. The sun was already setting.

That took longer than I expected.

Fran and Jet were training on what used to be the restaurant floor. I asked them not to make too much of a ruckus, so they spent their time practicing their spells, casting and drawing three-dimensional shapes in the air. It wasn’t so much training as play, and I doubted Fran saw it as

such. I thought I'd bring them some snacks for being a good beastgirl and direwolf.

Hm?

As I was preparing Fran's tea and cookies, I sensed the appearance of an odd presence. Fran sensed it as well, ceasing her practice to look around.

Looks like we have guests.

Our guests weren't difficult to notice. They'd concealed their presence while approaching the building, but their sheer number made it futile. They might as well have walked right in.

"Should I grab them?"

Wait, they might want something.

As yet, we didn't know what. One of them came around to the back door and knocked. His brazenness made me wonder who we were dealing with. Fran carefully answered it.

"Who is it?"

"Sorry for coming so late. I wanted to ask you a favor."

"A favor?"

"Yes, I'd really appreciate it if we could talk for a few minutes."

He sounded like a gentleman. That was as far as it went, though. His bad intentions were seeping through, and I could tell his manners were only skin-deep.

I looked out the window to see what our fake gentleman looked like. He was dressed like a mild-mannered merchant. He looked like he didn't have a single bad bone in his body. He would've tricked us too, if my Evil Sense hadn't kicked in.

A quick Identify revealed the rottenness of his character. His Class was listed as Fraud, and he had the Skills Threaten, Lie, and Counterfeit. A bad man indeed. He wasn't physically imposing, but it didn't make him any less dangerous.

"What do you want?"

"I'd appreciate it if you would let me in."

"Can't you just talk from there?"

"Our conversation might go on for a while."

As Fran stalled, I continued my observation from the window. His friends were hiding in the shadows, but it was no use against my Night Vision and Presence Sense.

The majority of them were weak. Bandit class, with the skills Mug and Steal. The only one we had to keep a lookout for was the single high-level Assassin leading them. He wasn't particularly strong, though he had the element of surprise on his side. He should be no problem once he was stripped of that, though.

What should we do? The man at the door hadn't done anything yet...aside from surrounding the place with his bandits, of course. It was safe to say that he didn't have our best interests in mind, but would we be in trouble for striking first? I already felt like the situation was enough to warrant self-defense. Anyone could see we were dealing with crooks.

Fran, let him in and don't let him get away. I'll go take care of our guests outside.

"Hm. Okay."

"Thank you so much for your understanding!" the fraud answered happily, mistaking Fran's response for an invitation.

"Come in."

"If you'll excuse me."

He walked through the door. Jet circled around and lay in front of the doorway, blocking his escape. Even though Jet had made himself smaller, he was still a wolf. Plenty intimidating for a Fraud with no battle prowess. He seemed nonchalant about it, but I caught him stealing a glance in Jet's direction.

"Oh, wow. That's a...real cute puppy you have there."

"Huh? Jet's a wolf."

"R-really?"

"Wolf-type monster."

"A-a monster?"

"He's my familiar. Really strong. Can kill people easy," Fran said, latching the door closed.

She was pressuring the con man now, and his facade finally cracked. A grimace appeared at the corner of his fake smile.

I exited the house before the con man could find me. Using the Space-Time spell Short Jump, I transported myself behind the bandits and observed the situation. I didn't know whether to attack them, wondering whether I should knock them out and find out what I could from them. Then again, I could kill the entire party and just leave the Assassin alive for interrogation...

"Do we really need an army to take this little girl down?"

"Just in case, you know."

"Well, it's a pain in the ass! We should've just skipped the talkin' and got right to killin'."

"We have our orders, man. Besides, you know she's gonna stink if you kill her first."

"Promise me we'll have some fun while she's still kicking and screaming."

"Heh heh. Don't you worry. We will."

Well, then. "She's gonna stink if you kill her first." Really? I didn't see the point to letting these scumbags live. I would be doing the rest of the world a favor. What "fun" did these people have planned in store for Fran, anyway? Whatever it was, she was never going to know.

Hey.

"Who's—"

Die.

I decapitated the idiot robber's head before he could finish and quickly disposed of it. None of them expected an ambush, and despite having Danger Sense, they couldn't react fast enough. These scumbags were as good as trash.

I worked quickly. The robbers might have been weak, but the Assassin had Presence Sense. His disappearing comrades wouldn't go unnoticed. I methodically cut each of them down, and one by one they fell. All in a day's work.

By the time I killed the fourth, the Assassin and the remaining two robbers had finally noticed something was off. They were disturbed, but as they argued among themselves about what to do, I took them out, too.

With the weaker robbers dead, I paralyzed the Assassin with Lightning Magic. He was still vaguely conscious, but I knocked him the rest of the way out with a telekinetic jab to the head.

All right. Back inside.

I floated the Assassin inside and hid him away in a corner of the shop.

"We'd like you to return it to us," said the Fraud. He was just getting to the meat of his discussion.

"The Soul Essence?"

"Yes. We know about your raid at the Bandit's Den, and we know you took it. We'd like to have it back."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's too late to play dumb now. We've looked into it, you see. We're willing to pay you, of course. How does 10,000G sound for your trouble?"

This guy was cheap. The thing was worth a hundred thousand, if not a hundred million. He either underestimated Fran or he had no intention of dealing with her at all.

I guessed it was the latter. He probably planned to sic the assassins on Fran one way or another. But how did he know that we had the Soul Essence?

Eugene should be the only one in town who knew... Did he tell? Even if he did, there was no reason why these people would come to our place. The Soul Essence was already in Eugene's lab. We needed to figure out where these people got their info.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I told you, we looked into it. You can drop the act."

"What act?"

"Is that how you're going to behave? Selling the Soul Essence would really be in your best interest."

The con man was showing his true colors now. I felt him use Intimidate. Not that it worked on Fran. The man's slight increase in volume only grated her ears.

"This conversation is over," said Fran. "Leave."

"Now, now, no need to be rude. I can't exactly leave without the Soul Essence."

He was blatantly threatening her now. If Fran were an ordinary girl, she would be cowering in fear. Instead, she furled her eyebrows in mild annoyance. Fear was the last thing on her mind.

“I told you, I don’t know. Are you stupid?”

She was starting to get angry. The man had interrupted her playtime—that is, her training—after all.

“Don’t give me lip, girl... You may be an adventurer, but you’ll reconsider your line of work once we’re through.” The con man finally dropped his pretense.

“That’s my line. I know what you are, con man. And you and your crew’ll pay with your lives for interrupting Teacher’s work.”

Aww, Fran’s getting angry for me. I got misty-eyed, I had to admit.

“Fine. Have it your way then. You won’t live to see morning!” the man shouted, turning towards the exit.

He was going to call on his backup.

“Grrr...”

Jet stood up to block his path.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Did you really think I’d let you leave?”

“M-my men will know of my absence. They will come for you!”

This guy was talking like a villain in a bad movie. This con man was second-rate at best. He came into this little girl’s house without asking why she allegedly had the Soul Essence he was sent to collect. A real pro wouldn’t have let his guard down around his mark.

“Go ahead and call them. See if they’re still around.”

"Very well. Come out, you lot! It's time you earned your keep!"

He shouted loud enough for anyone outside to hear. The con man grinned, surely imagining his crew would come barging in through doors and windows to corner this little girl.

Alas, no one came.

"Wh-what..."

"Teacher took care of your backup."

"You aren't alone?! Damn it, they didn't tell me about this!"

Fran calmly pinned the con man to the floor. He couldn't believe how much strength she had in her small arms. He looked at her, fear and confusion clear on his face.

It was time to find out what we needed to know. Interrogating a fraud would usually be difficult since lying was second nature to them. Fortunately, we had Essence of Falsehood to see through his lies.

"Wh-what are you doing? You won't get away with this, I warn you!"

"Who told you about me?" asked Fran.

"A very good quest—aaargh!"

Fran administered a painful, but non-lethal, amount of electricity. He twitched as a jolt of Lightning Magic shot through his bare skin. We didn't want blood all over the kitchen, so shock therapy was the best choice.

"Huff, huff..."

"I'll ask you again. How did you know I had the Soul Essence?"

"Do you think I'll—raaaargh!"

He was stubborn, I'd give him that much. We might as well interrogate the Assassin while we were at it, too.

Jet, bring the Assassin in, please.

"Woof."

I thought our guests might motivate each other if they saw each other's pain.

"H-how..." the Fraud groaned as Jet dragged the Assassin in. He didn't think anyone could take the Assassin down so quietly, or maybe he was just wondering when he got captured.

Thirty minutes later and worn out with exhaustion, both men told us everything. We had succeeded in preventing bloodshed, although that didn't stop our assailants from crying, drooling, and worst of all, peeing all over the floor. I'd have to pull out my strongest Cleansing Magic for this one.

"So you're from the Ythra Trade Association?"

"Yes..."

The same group who allegedly sent thugs to extort money from the orphanage.

The person looking for our Soul Essence was a rogue alchemist working for the YTA. One of the Adventurers' Guild's alchemists was secretly working for them and had overheard our conversation with Eugene.

The Soul Essence we had stumbled upon was ordered from a faraway land and had been in the process of being delivered to them. I thought those bandits were a little too well equipped. It turned out they were backed by the YTA all along. I was convinced that the trade association was merely a front for their illegal conduct. Now I could use the Cure Turmeric with a clear conscience.

Fran asked where this rogue alchemist was, but the Fraud had no idea. We knew his base of operations, at least.

The Assassin was also working for the YTA, but we got some conflicting information out of him. He said he was really working for a mage called Linford. He was a master mage from a distant land, with criminals and rogue mercenaries under his employ. He was trying to establish a base in Bulbola and cooperating with the YTA to do so.

This could get messy. Captain Rengill warned us not to get involved with Ythra, but what could we do when they came to us?

The Assassin and the Fraud had a rough relationship. They didn't trust each other to begin with, since they served different masters. The way they snarled at each other was almost violent.

To the Assassin, the YTA were a bunch of limp-wristed tradesmen who were only intimidating because they employed the Linford Group. On the other hand, the YTA thought the Linford Group were money-grabbing parasites who talked big game but ultimately delivered nothing. The Assassin's colleagues had messed up at some point, and the trade association was having a time cleaning it up.

We weren't up against the Illuminati, but our enemies were significant organizations nonetheless. They had the resources to look us up and the gall to assault us. We could try confronting them but might end up stepping on some aristocratic toes in the process...

As we mused over our next step, the two men began to plead.

"W-we've told you everything we know!"

"We don't know anything else, I swear!"

"Hm."

"P-please let us go..."

That wasn't going to happen, but we weren't going to kill them either. They were valuable witnesses. So we knocked them out and bound their hands and feet with mana thread.

This is turning into quite a mess.

The YTA had their sights on us, and there was no telling when they might strike again.

Captain Rengill was the first to warn us about them, so perhaps the Lucille Trade Association might know more. The fact that they could still do business in Bulbola meant that they had some powerful backing. The rumors of their links to the local aristocracy were probably true. If so, the marked carriages entering the mansion implicated Marquis Christon.

That would make it difficult to talk about the orphanage's plight with him. If the Count was actually behind the YTA, then we would be complaining about the crooked trade association to his face. And we still had a contest to win, which meant we had no time to worry about the YTA.

Things were coming to a head. The best course of action was to drop out of the contest altogether...but I didn't think Fran would allow that. And of course, there was the matter of the orphanage.

Well, nothing we can do but stay alert.

We would start by checking whether Count Rhodus was corrupt. At the moment, all we had to go on was hearsay. Our plan was simple. We would talk to him, bring up the subject, and let Essence of Falsehood do the rest. Good thing we were staying at the Count's abode. Meeting him wouldn't be difficult.

Let's go back to the mansion for now.

"Hm."

I packed everything we needed for the contest into the Pocket Dimension. Then we stuffed the two criminals into a burlap sack and loaded them on Jet's back. They would have nowhere to run even if they woke up.

We took our time in returning to the mansion, expecting another ambush, but none came.

One of the guards did approach us, but a namedrop was enough to let Fran off the hook. The city guards had circulated the name of the Count's honored guest among themselves.

We circled around to the back of the mansion, and Sebastian welcomed us in. It was like he knew by instinct when his master's guests would return.

"Welcome back."

I had to admit, being welcomed by an actual butler raised my spirits.

His composure was even more impressive. The sack Jet was carrying was now squirming and crying for help, but Sebastian didn't flinch. All he did was look at it curiously.

"Their Highnesses have been waiting for you. I have been instructed to lead you to their room immediately."

We needed to meet Fult and Satya first. Fortunately, they were still on the premises.

"Shall I take your...sack for you?"

Sebastian didn't want anything this suspicious entering the prince's room. However, if the Count really was behind this, the head butler was our enemy as well. If we handed the sack over, he might permanently silence its residents.

"I'm good."

"But, miss..."

"No problem. Really."

“I must insist...”

The head butler had to do his job, but Fran insisted on keeping her sack.

“Okay.”

“Thank you. If I may—”

“I’ll make it stop squirming.”

“Excuse me?”

Fran took the sack off Jet’s back and Stun Bolted it. The bag twitched for a few moments and ultimately fell silent.

“Now, we’re good.”

“I-I suppose so.”

Fear was clearly written in Sebastian’s eyes. The butler let us in, Jet still carrying two members of criminal society on his back, and we made our way to the prince’s quarters.

Satya, Fult, and Sellid were waiting inside.

“Hey, you’re back.”

“Welcome home.”

The prince and princess greeted Fran with their usual good cheer. They really did quite like her.

“Have you finished your preparations for the contest?”

“Hm. Perfect.” Fran nodded and gave them a thumbs up.

“You said you were cooking up something curry-related. How did it go?”

“I would love to sample it if you have it ready.”

“Here.”

Fran served a large platter of curry bread to the curious Fult and Satya.

All flavors were available. I needed someone other than Fran and Jet to try them anyway, so I was thankful. My companions were a little too biased to be reliable sometimes.

“Oh my! What kind of bread is this?”

“Are these filled with curry, perhaps?”

“Hm,” said Fran. “Curry bread. The pinnacle of cooking.”

“I-Is it really that good?”

“Hm.”

“If you’ll excuse me.”

The twins helped themselves to some curry bread. There were no food tasters, not that they needed any with Fran. The prince and princess had already tasted her cooking during the Seedrun conflict. Chamberlain Sellid didn’t stop them, either. It was good to know that we had earned the old crank’s trust.

“It’s good!”

“Very good. I’ve never had something so spicy and sweet!”

We received rave reviews. I guess even royalty could appreciate curry bread.

“I told you, curry’s the best.”

“I think I see why you keep going on about it now.”

“Indeed.”

Fran looked smug as her friends enjoyed their food. She nodded every time they mentioned how delicious it was.

“Visiting your food stall would be difficult for us. I’m glad we could try it here.”

“Get someone to buy it for you.”

"We can't do that either, unfortunately. As royal guests, we must be content with the Count's cooking. And don't get me started on the poison testing."

When you were royalty, every little act was political.

The other kids joined us then. We hadn't seen them in a while, and it seemed like a dark shadow hung over them. What happened? Did someone speak ill of them here? They *were* street urchins until only a few days ago, after all.

"What happened?" Fran asked, sounding worried.

The prince answered for them. Fortunately, the reason was nowhere as sinister as we thought.

"Oh, they're not feeling well."

"We suspect it's indigestion."

The kids had felt ill since the night before and spent the entire day in bed. They had just woken up, and only because they heard Fran was back. I wondered if the food served at the Count's manor had caused their current condition. Maybe their stomachs were shocked at the sudden intake of fine dining.

"You guys okay?"

"We're feeling a little rough, but it's nothing terrible. Maybe a bite of your bread will make us feel better."

"Sure."

The kid sure had a healthy appetite for someone with an upset stomach. Fran didn't worry about his health, since eating delicious food was always her top priority. I wouldn't want to eat something as oily as curry bread if I were feeling sick, though.

Fortunately, the children were on the same page as Fran. Soph, the tallest of the three, took the bread first,

followed by the short Tenyl. Altie, the only girl and the youngest among them, hesitated.

“This is great!” Soph said, sinking his teeth into the crunchy skin.

“I can keep eating this all night!”

Tenyl made quick work of his curry bread. The two boys ate one after another, like they were in a contest. Their appetites were impressive. They looked much healthier too, and I wondered if the healing effects of the Cure Turmeric were kicking in.

The magical root was known to cure status ailments, so maybe it could just as easily cure an upset stomach. It sure looked like that anyway. After seeing her friends gobble down the curry bread like it was going out of style, Altie seemed to recover her appetite. She finally took one of her own.

Fran, we should get to the point.

“?”

Fran looked like she had completely forgotten. All the praise for my curry bread had gone to her head.

We need to know if the Count is crooked. Remember?

“Right. I forgot.”

“Forgot what, Fran?”

“I need a favor.”

“What is it? We’ll do anything we can to help,” Satya said, taking Fran’s hand.

“Thanks. I need to see the Count.”

“Lord Rhodus? Why?”

We explained the events of the last few days.

Fran told them about the orphanage and everything we'd found in the bandit's hideout. About the link to the Ythra Trade Association and how the Count might be behind it.

"I see you've been busy."

"It is Fran we're talking about."

They were shocked to say the least.

"That's why I need to see the Count. To see if he's one of the bad guys."

"I see. But you must remember that he is as cunning as aristocrats come. I doubt he will tell you the truth."

"Don't worry. I brought these guys just in case."

"And that would be?"

"Hm."

Fran untied the sack and let its contents pour out onto the floor.

"Kya!"

I silently apologized for startling Satya. The sight of two grown men all tied up might have been too much for her.

"They work for the YTA, and they attacked me. I'm going to present them to the Count and see how he reacts."

"I see... Sellid, arrange a meeting with the Count immediately!"

"Yes, my lord."

And just like that, we were on the Count's day planner. This was one of the many perks of royalty. They could get you an appointment with nobility in less than five minutes.

"You called, my lord?"

"I apologize for calling you on such short notice, Count Rhodus."

"Not at all. It must be a matter of grave importance if you have need of me so suddenly," the Count replied, his eyes narrowing with worry.

It was so late that it was impossible that the meeting was anything other than urgent. He looked around the room, trying to figure out what was going on. Eventually, his eyes eventually settled on the two captives.

"Wh-who are these men?!" he shouted in shock.

If he was acting, it was very realistic.

"You don't know them?" asked Fran.

"Of course not! Why would I know these people?"

"They work for the Ythra Trade Association. They - attacked me tonight."

"What happened?"

He didn't look like he knew anything, but we decided to press him a little further just in case.

"Do you know about the orphanage?"

"You mean the orphanage in the downtown area?"

"Yeah. They've been having a hard time since you cut off their funding."

"What?"

He didn't know? Maybe the funds for the orphanage were too small for the Count to notice. Still, Fran explained the situation. She told him that the orphanage's funding was cut off suddenly, and despite the caretaker's best efforts, nothing was done about it. They inevitably had to borrow money, which was when a con man defrauded them. A con man who happened to be working for the YTA.

Fran implied that this chain of events made it look like the Count was behind the Ythra Trade Association.

"The timing between the cut-off funding and the - appearance of the con man is way too convenient."

"So you're saying I was the one who sent this wretch?!"

"I didn't say that. But I do wonder how the YTA found out about the papers you sent. Very fishy. They had your seal on them."

"What? Impossible! I did not put my seal on any such document!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! You think I can maintain my office through such crooked dealings?"

He sounded sure of himself. Marquis Christon was telling the truth. He knew nothing about the orphanage. Still, the fact remained that someone had used his name. Someone working with the YTA.

"But who could possibly use my seal without my knowledge..." the Count muttered.

He was beginning to suspect someone in his ranks.

"So you have nothing to do with the YTA?"

"Of course not!" Rhodus shouted with fury.

There wasn't a trace of falsehood in his statement. He wasn't behind the YTA after all. We'd better apologize before things got out of hand.

"Sorry...for suspecting you."

"No, it's all right. I apologize, as well. It seems that someone close to me might be dealing with the wrong people..."

The Count bowed his head. It was the last thing I - expected him to do. He might be more upright than I initially suspected.

"Do accept our apology as well, Count Rhodus," said Fult.

"We were beginning to think the worst of you," Satya agreed.

"I do not blame you. I would've suspected myself if I heard of such rumors... I suppose you wish to place the members of the Ythra Trade Association under arrest?"

"Yeah. Go for it."

I was going to have them testify against Marquis Christon if he was lying, but it turned out there was no need for that. Now that he was clear of all suspicion, we would love to place these two in his custody.

"All right. You can come in now."

Rhodus called to someone behind the door. A young man of considerable stature walked in. He looked similar to Rhodus, with his blonde hair, blue eyes, and body covered with thick muscle. He had the presence of a soldier.

"This is my eldest, Phillip."

"I am Phillip Christon. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

He was strong, too. His stats were close to Colbert's.

"He is the captain of the Knight's Brigade. He's had his hands full with security for the Festival of the Moons lately. Today is his first day off in a while. He wished to greet Your Highnesses personally..."

The Count ordered Phillip to place the two men under arrest and interrogate them. He explained the - circumstances, and his son gave an unexpected answer.

“As it happens, Father, we arrested some YTA cronies last night, too.”

YTA members were getting captured left and right lately.

“What are the charges?”

“They planned to end the festival’s ritual last night by kidnapping one of the dancers. I believe the Prince’s friend assisted in their capture.”

He turned to Fult and then to Fran.

“Our friend?”

“Yes. The adventurer Fran is a friend of yours, is she not?”

“Who, me?”

The kidnappers must be the ones Jet subdued in the alleyway. So the guards had succeeded in jailing them. I wished they’d kept quiet about Fran’s involvement, though.

“Are you Fran, by any chance?”

“Yeah.”

“I was wondering what kind of woman this adventurer would be. I never expected her to be a sweet little girl.”

Despite Phillip’s burly stature, he was still the son of a great aristocrat. He could be backhanded and condescending with the best of them. Still, there was no ill will behind his statement. He was just expressing himself honestly. I thought him too straightforward to be an effective socialite, but at least he didn’t seem like a bad guy.

“In any case, the thugs you apprehended were working for the Ythra Trade Association. They were ordered to kidnap a dancer called Charlotte before she could finish the ritual.”

“Why Charlotte?”

"We don't know. However, they planned to interrupt the ceremony. Maybe they thought it better to kidnap rather than kill. She is quite beautiful, you know."

Phillip shared the fruits of his interrogation. He didn't tell us anything we didn't already know, but it underscored how busy the YTA had been. Phillip took the two men away, and Rhodus left too, saying he needed to figure out the traitor in his midst. Unauthorized use of his seal was a grave crime.

We asked Phillip a few more questions before he left, and he answered us truthfully. He was an honest captain and ill-suited for the cunning plays of the court.

The Count and his eldest son were cleared of any and all suspicion. That was a big enough win for us.

"It seems that bad things are going to happen in this town soon..."

"Yes. We must be careful."

"Hm. That's a good idea," Fran agreed.

"What will you do now, Fran?"

"Go back to the kitchen and get back to preparing."

"Are you sure? Wouldn't it be safer here?"

"I have Jet with me, don't worry."

We left the mansion despite the twins' insistence. They only let us go because they knew how strong Fran and Jet were. Before we went, we left a load of curry bread for the mansion's helpers. The Count might own the mansion, but they were the ones in charge of its daily operation. Treating them nicely wouldn't hurt. We were going to be intruding for the next few nights, anyway.

Let's give it one final push before tomorrow.

"Yeah!"

Morning came. We were at the Chefs' Guild, listening to the final reading of the contest rules.

We'd expected another YTA raid last night, but none came. I didn't think that was the end of it, so we couldn't let our guard down. If they tried any funny business, we'd be ready.

"The contestants will leave the Chefs' Guild at ten o'clock, and the contest will begin at twelve. You will have two hours to set up your stalls. You are allowed to operate in the harbor, marketplace, and the residential areas. Anywhere is fine as long as you have permission from the owner of the property. Note that you cannot start selling your wares before twelve o'clock. Failure to comply will result in a disqualification."

The other semi-final contestants were all around us. Each shop owner was present, along with a single helper. No one else was allowed in.

Fran was with Colbert. The other three girls were outside, preparing our stall.

"Is your master not here today?"

"Hm. He's watching over us, don't worry."

I had a great view of the action from Fran's back, and I could see she was getting a lot of attention from the other contestants.

"Hey, is that—"

"The girl whose food Old Meckam said was delicious—"

"She's still so young—"

They didn't make light of her, despite her tender age.

It sounded like our judge had a name for himself. His complaints about my lack of Chef Pride aside, he said my

dish was delicious. Talk spread, and the veterans were wary about the new beastgirl on the block. Even Colbert looked shocked.

“Fran, did your master get a personal endorsement from Elder Meckam? Is that how you guys got through to semi-finals?”

“Who?”

“Old Meckam, the Gourmet! He’s one of the people running the Chefs’ Guild!”

The top executives of the guild had authority to send someone straight through to the semi-finals. Meckam was notorious for being impossible to please, and it was rare of him to execute his authority. It was no wonder that people were talking about the Black Tail. Meckam had made it sound like passing through the preliminaries was no great feat.

“We promised to knock his socks off.”

“Such determination...!”

“We are going to the finals.”

“Damn right, we will!” Colbert agreed. “We’ll work our hinds off!”

We left the Chefs’ Guild once the committee finished their clarifications. The stalls were laid out in front of the guild hall and ours was among them, of course. We’d ordered a stall with minimal cooking equipment. I expected a Japanese style stall, but they looked more Western with their colorful awnings. In Wonderland, these stalls would be selling multi-colored popcorn.

Ours stood out, especially with three beautiful girls surrounding it.

“We’ll work to earn our keep.”

"You can count on it."

"Hee hee. What do you think? Don't I look cute?"

Fran and our three helpers were dressed in gothic maid outfits. They looked chic and adorable. I don't know where Colbert got his hands on them, but they looked great. Although the outfits had terrible defense values, they more than made up for it in cuteness. If I could, I'd give the man a pat on the back!

The other contestants had pretty girls hawking their wares, too. It would seem that no matter what world you were in, the basic marketing strategy of strippers and steak remained a constant. Of course, Fran was easily prettier and classier than all the others combined.



“The curry bread we had the other day was amazing!” said Colbert. “But I thought we needed to pull out all the stops to get through the semi-finals. These outfits will do just that. They’re our secret weapon!”

“Colbert and I spent all night thinking of this strategy. I hope you like dressing up, Fran,” Judith said, puffing up her chest with pride.

We’d fed her bread and curry rice yesterday, along with our other dishes. They seemed to have made an impact. She was eager to blast through the semi-finals and see what fine dining I could cook up.

“I’ll do my best to help.”

“Not to worry. I’ll bring the boys to the stall.”

Maya clenched her fists, while Lydia hiked up her skirt teasingly. It was nice to see our helpers get into it, although Lydia needed to stop that skirt action before we got slapped with a public indecency warning.

We did one last check on our food cart and moved to our location. Colbert was on cart-pulling duty. I initially wanted to let Jet do the job, but a giant direwolf would stick out like a sore thumb and could scare away our customers.

On the way to our designated spot, a small crowd started to follow us. I thought they were thugs sent by the competition, but it turned out they were customers. They’d already planned which stalls they would visit first, so they could be there the second the stall opened. Our crowd wanted to avoid the sales war, so they prioritized our lesser-known food stall.

The crowd grew until over fifty people were following us. This was as good as a new entrant could get. The more popular stores had crowds of over three hundred.

I might have underestimated this contest. It wasn't certain that we'd get past the semi-finals.

"That's a lot of people," said Fran, sounding surprised.

"Ha ha. There's a reason why the March Moons Festival is considered one of the Three Great Festivals in Granzell. The temple ritual, minstrel competition, and cooking contest are all very popular. You ain't seen nothing yet, Fran."

"What are the other Great Festivals?"

"There's the King's New Year Festival and the Ulmutt Dungeon Festival."

"The New Year's Festival is a lot like Bulbola's Moons Festival."

The last Festival of the Moons landed on the same day as the New Year, making for an immense spectacle. The New Year's Festival was similar to the one in Bulbola. The royal temple held a ritual of purification, and open-air stalls lined the streets. The difference lay in the other ceremonies, which included an address by the ruling king.

But what of this Dungeon Festival? That sounded different.

"The Dungeon Festival is for hot-blooded, battle-hungry adventurers," said Lydia.

Well, that sounded bloodthirsty.

"I suppose Lydia's not entirely wrong. The festival is quite intense."

"What do they do?"

"It's called a festival, but the Dungeon Festival is really a fighting tournament."

"A tournament held in Granzell's adventurer capital."

A fighting tournament. Interesting. It was worth checking out even if we didn't participate.

“When is it?”

“Late April. About a month from now. It’s to celebrate the founding of Ulmutt’s dungeon.”

That was perfect timing. We were heading for Ulmutt after our stopover in Bulbola. I hoped we could make it in time.

Soon, we reached our destination.

“And we’re here.”

As interested as I was in the fighting tournament, right now we had a cooking contest to win. We stopped in the square outside the Adventurers’ Guild. We had a decent crowd, so I thought we’d get started on line management. The residents of Bulbola were much more experienced at this and arranged themselves into lines without complaint. None of them even asked for an early sample.

We decided to set up on the north side of the square, our backs facing the clock tower. Fran took out some curry bread from the Pocket Dimension and put it on display. We put up a sign reading, “One curry bread:10G,” and put a pot of oil on the stove.

“This is great. Did you come up with this yourself, Fran?”

“It was Teacher’s idea.”

“This teacher of yours really knows his stuff.”

“Merchants use this kind of thing, but it’s the first time I’ve seen one made solely for coins. Was it custom-made for this food cart?”

“Pretty much.”

“The Swordceress’ Teacher is a master of many trades.”

“I know. He’s the best.”

The girls were fawning over a wooden coin holder. I'd modeled it after the coin holders back on Earth, but - apparently they weren't widely used here. I'd marked the chambers for each coin type and had a gauge which indicated how much was left. Judith marveled at it, - merchant's daughter that she was.

The wooden coin holder was easy to use, so I figured it would speed up the payment process. I expected to face a slew of customers, so I had three cash registers open.

It was lunchtime when we finished setting up, and Fran and the others sat a little distance away from the food cart. Things were going to get hectic when the contest started, so this might be their only break. At least, I hoped it would.

"All right, time for lunch."

On seeing the menu I'd prepared for them, Colbert and others cheered.

"Finally!"

"This is pretty much why we took this job."

"If what we had for breakfast is anything to go by, then well..."

"Those egg sandwiches... Yum."

The crew loved the egg sandwiches they had for breakfast, so I decided to give them more sandwiches for lunch. Egg was still an option, now accompanied with ham, sweet and sour chicken, and tuna cutlet.

"They're so good!"

"Lydia, you can't just take that! The same goes for you, Fran!"

"Heh."

"Survival of the hungriest."

"I'll be taking this, then."

“Maya!”

“This juice hits the spot! It’s so fresh and flavorful!”

Lunch was a battlefield. The five of them cleaned out the fifty sandwiches I had prepared in an instant. Actually, it made me think I hadn’t prepared enough. They quarreled and stole each other’s sandwiches, pouting when they didn’t get to sample some of the flavors. I just hoped they would get along when we got to selling curry bread.

Our food cart was under the watchful eyes of the Chefs’ Guild supervisor. A single supervisor attended each food cart to make sure there was no foul play. Their main job was to calculate the total sales and report our profits back to the guild. Any attempts at bribery or fraudulence would result in an instant disqualification. We did offer our supervisor some sandwiches, but he politely declined. Oh, but his eyes were fixated on them! I felt sorry for him. It was the worst job to get stuck with in this contest.

“This sandwich is delicious! But it sure can’t beat our curry bread!”

“Oh, I wish we could buy Black Tail’s entire stock!”

Colbert and Lydia shouted. Onlookers unsure about the new entrant rushed to join the line. There was now over a hundred people waiting. Today might be busy.

And I was right.

“So that’s three plain and two hot.”

“Four orders of Ultra-hot, please.”

“That’ll be 40G.”

The clock tower showed a little past three in the afternoon, but our customers kept on coming in the hundreds. I had already fetched four additional lots of

curry bread out of the Pocket Dimension, so we were doing great. We let the Crimson Maidens man the cash register, while Fran kept the pot going and made sure the aroma of freshly fried curry bread wafted through the air. Meanwhile, Colbert was in charge of line management.

“Hey there, little lady. I came just like I promised.”

“Hm.”

“And I told everyone I knew.”

The adventurers and farmer we’d saved at the bandit’s hideout came, and each brought their friends along with them.

“Curry bread only 10G a piece! We got Plain for the kiddies, Hot for the spice lovers, and Ultra-hot if you want to breathe fire!”

Colbert shilled our bread to anyone wondering what flavor to buy. Our shop was winning the speed contest. As Judith mentioned, over half our customers had already decided which carts to hit. That said, there were still a lot of people who didn’t know what they wanted. Their best option was to join Black Tail’s line, since ours was so short. It was a good strategy.

I wouldn’t exactly consider our line short, though. How bad were the other food carts? I wouldn’t have wanted to queue here. The whole thing reminded me of my past life. I once heard of a store that sold amazing pancakes, so I decided to go after work. But after seeing the line loop twice around the block, I gave up and had some ramen with gyoza at the neighboring stall.

“Come to the Black Tail for food that’s good and good for you! Spice enough to make you sweat and clear your pores, and it’s great for your insides, too!”

Colbert advertised the Cure Turmeric we used in our cooking. The magic plant was considered a luxury, so it was quite the selling point.

Then someone finally came to wreck our parade.

“What’s all this then?! You selling some dog crap?!”

“Your bread sure looks like it’s filled with it!”

Our aggressors looked like they came from the apocalypse. They had mohawks and wore spiked leather jackets. So here were our thugs, then. Our competition must’ve sent them over.

Checking their stats, I found them to be awfully weak. While their menacing looks might intimidate the average person, they were only as strong as novice adventurers. I guess you didn’t need to go all out when dealing with cooks.

“Go on, get outta here!”

“Your food probably tastes like crap anyway! Ugh, just looking at it makes me wanna puke!”

“Here, we’ll help you clear out your shop... permanently!”

The thugs took out their clubs, and our customers screamed in terror.

Fran, who was supposed to be manning the stove, warped right in front of them. The insult to curry bread fueled her speed.

She used Lighting Magic to paralyze the three thugs.

I wanted to get back to business and get some information while I was at it.

Fran, I'll take over from here. You go back to the cart.

Got it.

Jet, carry them for me.

“Woof.”

Jet dragged the three thugs to an alleyway behind our food cart. Leaving them out in the open would scare away our customers and just generally be a terrible business decision.

I created a clone of myself to follow Jet and cast Stone Wall around us for some privacy. Then I used Silence so their screams wouldn’t bother the neighbors. Whatever happened within these walls wouldn’t leave it.

No matter what... Heh heh.

Despite my thoughts of terrible torture, the interrogation ended without bloodshed. They were all terrified of the giant direwolf. My slightest scowl was enough to give them the shakes. With the clone representing me, I proceeded to ask them questions.

“Tell me what I want to know, and I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“Y-yes! Anything!”

“Just get that monster away from us!”

The thugs sobbed, which made me feel like the bad guy. It ticked me off to the point that I wanted to hit them, but information was more important.

“Good. Let’s start with...”

The interrogation went smoothly after that. They answered all my questions honestly. Our thugs were underage boys, not brave or strong enough to become adventurers and mercenaries. Instead, they took shakedown jobs from folks who needed dumb intimidation. What shocked me was their age. Their attire made them all look over twenty.

"And why are you kids bothering Black Tail? You need pocket money, is that it?"

"S-someone hired us out of nowhere!"

A strange man hired them just the night before. They would each receive ten thousand gold for their services.

The job order was simple: harass and destroy certain target food carts. Apparently, there were several delinquent groups hired to run this racket. Our intimidators usually ran in a group of six, but they'd split up into threes to finish the job faster. The food carts they were told to target were Black Tail and the Bulbola Orphanage.

"Look."

"Y-yes, sir."

"I'm going to hand you over to the town guards now. Tell them everything you know."

"W-we will!"

"But do not, under any circumstances, tell them - anything about me. Don't even mention me. I'll kill you if you do."

The boys turned blue and nodded.

"W-we won't say a word!"

"We promise!"

I knew delinquents, and I knew their tendency to make promises in the heat of the moment that they would forget a second later. Fortunately, these guys also had the IQ of a chimpanzee. I just needed to assert my dominance. I focused mana on my finger to make it glow and waved it menacingly.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"I've cast a curse on you. If you say anything about me, I *will* know."

“Eek!”

Not that I knew of such a spell. It was all a magic show, but the boys seemed eager to believe it.

“You boys better clean up your act. Next time I catch you do anything stupid like this, I’ll sic my direwolf on you. It took a while to wean him off human flesh...”

“We’ll turn over a new leaf!”

“We won’t do anything bad ever again!”

“Spare us, please!”

I left. Not long after, Colbert came with the city guard to arrest them.

Colbert wondered why the boys looked scared out of their skin, but he decided not to pursue the matter. He didn’t want to know what Fran had done to them. In this world, retaliation and vengeance were common. Enacting retribution on thugs who had disturbed the peace was just the right thing to do.

Fran, the orphanage is in trouble.

Fran nodded gravely, and I wasted no time in telling her what I had learned.

You have to go, Teacher.

Me?

I have to stay here. It has to be you.

Fran was responsible for our food cart. Although she signed up for the competition under my name, she was my representative. With the supervisor overlooking our operations, we had no choice.

I had reservations about leaving Fran by herself, but she was clearly more worried about the orphanage. I originally planned to send Jet over there to make sure things were okay...

All right. Come on, Jet. Are you sure you can do this, Fran?

Yeah! You can leave the shop to me.

Time to go save some orphans.

Colbert's around if you need backup, I told her.

I know.

Take us away, Jet.

"Arf!"

Jet took me into the shadows with him. At times like this, I appreciated being a sword. Jet could stow me away because I was an inanimate object, but I still got a clear view of what was happening outside.

"Bark, bark!"

Jet ran as fast as he could without attracting attention. All the same, he caught the eye of some city guards who tried to chase him down, but no human legs could ever catch a direwolf. Jet's conspicuously equipped familiar collar helped too, I figured that was ultimately why the guards gave up on their chase. Still, the direwolf couldn't help but scare some of the more tender boys and girls of Bulbola. I silently apologized for making them cry.

There it is.

"Woof."

The orphanage's food cart was in fine shape considering the amount of people lining up to get a piece. There must've been over three hundred people. Jet Air Hopped over the crowd and landed on the orphanage grounds. The kids gathered around him.

"Hey, it's Jet!"

"Jet!"

“What are you doing here, buddy?”

Despite only meeting Jet yesterday, they recognized him immediately.

Shouldn’t these kids be helping Io with the food cart? I looked past the children and saw that the older kids were helping, leaving the younger ones with the enviable task of making merry.

Jet looked delighted as the kids fluffed his head. He didn’t usually get this kind of treatment, given most people were terrified of him. But the kids recognized him as Fran’s pet dog and liked him just as much as they liked his owner.

Things were looking too calm. Where were the thugs?

Since Jet was enjoying himself, I decided to wait, hoping for an uneventful time. And then our guests arrived.

“What the hell?! What are these leftovers in this soup?! I paid good money for this!”

“I-I’m so sorry, sir.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it! Maybe I’ll forgive you if you close up shop!”

“B-but...”

“Is that a no?”

“Uuh...”

It was déjà vu. The thugs who surrounded Io and the kids looked exactly like the ones who had attacked us.

“Please, forgive me.”

“Waaah!”

“Shut the hell up!”

“You better get on your knees for pissing us off!” the thugs threatened.

Io and the children turned pale with fear. The sight was abominable.

Jet.

“Grrr.”

Jet leaped in front of the thugs. I thought that soiled underwear was punishment enough for this lot, but things didn’t go as I expected.

“What’s with the dog?”

“You growling at me, puppy?”

They were terrified, but stubborn pride got in the way of their escape. The thugs struck the ground with their bats to intimidate Jet. Maybe I should’ve told him to revert to his original size. Then again, things might degenerate into an all-out panic if the crowd found a giant Darkness Wolf in their midst. We’d scare off the thugs, but also the orphanage’s customers.

Oh, well. Go for it, boy.

“We’ll kill y—oof!”

On my mark, Jet tackled one of the thugs. The biggest of the delinquents flew a good ten meters, landed, and stopped moving. He had twisted his leg but was otherwise unhurt. Good enough. The remaining two were knocked away when Jet got close to them. His sheer mass and speed sent the thugs flying.

“Awooo!”

“You did it, Jet!”

“That was so cool!”

“Bark, bark!”

Jet dragged the scattered thugs and dumped them together in a pile. Then, he climbed on top of that pile to let

out a howl of victory as the kids cheered him on. I was glad to have averted what was potentially a traumatic scenario.

One of the kids had informed the city guard, and they came to take the thugs away. Things would've been a lot worse if we hadn't been around. The dirty tricks some people would resort to just to win a competition. It astounded me.

Well, what now?

Another shakedown party might come along when we left, but I was worried about leaving Fran alone with the food cart. As I contemplated my next move, a familiar face approached.

“Are you guys okay?!”

“Charlotte!”

“Jet came and saved us!”

Charlotte was here now. Being an adventurer, she would have no problem dealing with five or even ten of those petty hooligans. She had been called to make a statement about the Ythra Trade Association’s fraud over the orphanage. It seemed Marquis Christon really had launched an investigation.

“I’m so glad you’re all right. Oh, I wish they wouldn’t call me in during the busiest time of the year,” Charlotte said, frowning.

I felt guilty since we were partly to blame for her being called. But now that she was here, the orphanage was in safe hands.

There were some guards accompanying her, too. They should be enough to deter further future shakedowns. We returned to our food cart and waited for the day to reach its uneventful end.

Let’s go back to the Chefs’ Guild.

“Hm.”

With the first day wrapped up, we returned our cart to the guild. Tomorrow, we would start all over again.

Colbert asked the other shops if they had any trouble with thugs today. Dragonhead and Noble Dish joined Black Tail and Bulbola Orphanage on the list of shakedown victims. Black Tail was personally endorsed by Meckam, and the other three shops were in the running to win.

“How’d they end up?”

“Dragonhead’s all right. The owner’s a former A-Rank Adventurer, after all.”

“That strong?”

“A couple of thugs wouldn’t make him break a sweat, even now. He used to procure the dragon meat for his dishes by himself, you know.”

A former A-Rank adventurer, and a dragon killer at that. I Identified the owner of the Dragonhead as he talked to a guild official.

Excuse me, he’s sixty?

The man didn’t look a day over forty. He sure knew how to dress. His fighting stats had decreased over time, but he was still strong. Numbers wise, he was about even with Colbert. He might even be stronger than Black Wing Valuza, the Flash Knight we fought during the Seedrun Conflict. If there was anyone in this guild hall I didn’t want to fight, it’d be this guy. He had the battle experience that came with age and the stats to back it up. In a way, he was even deadlier than someone with stronger stats. We would do well to stay on his good side.

The representative of the Noble Dish, however, was accompanied by a posse, looking smug. The posse of chefs surrounded the man himself—the Count’s youngest son. This

was the chef of the family that Rhodus had mentioned. Unlike his brother Phillip, he had no fighting capability. So how did he fend off the thugs that came to shake up his store? I thought about it and came to the conclusion that he probably hired some guards. He was still a son of the Count, after all.

But that didn't turn out to be the case.

"He got on his knees and begged them to spare his beloved customers. Touched by his act of humility, the robbers let him off for today."

The moving tale had circulated all around Bulbola. Noble Dish was going to get a lot of customers tomorrow.

In the end, that meant only four shops were attacked today.

As the day drew to an end, we gave Colbert the food we promised for his trouble. It was nothing special, just a basket filled with some meat stew.

"Here's dinner."

"You packed it up in a basket, too? Thanks!"

"Try not to fight over it this time."

"Of course."

"We'll all share it together."

They seemed set on repeating the lunchtime conflict, but maybe that was just their way of enjoying themselves.

"See you tomorrow."

"Take care of yourself!"

We left Colbert and the others, returned to our leased restaurant, and got right back to work. We sold more than I expected and needed to make a lot more so we didn't run out tomorrow.

Jet, Fran, you two can help yourselves to dinner.

“Sure.”

“Woof!”

I had curry bread to fry, and lots of it. I checked the temperature of the oil as I thought about the shakedowns.

The thugs were sent by the competition, no doubt about it. But with twenty contestants, not to mention their friends and sponsors, the list of suspects numbered over a hundred. The only ones who were free of suspicion were the four carts that were attacked.

Hang on. Something isn’t right, here.

Colbert said that the attackers left Noble Dish alone after the owner got on his knees. I saw Io apologize to those thugs, and they still threatened to shut her down.

Jet?

“Woof.”

Do you have the scent of the Count’s youngest?

“Arf.”

All right, I want you to keep watch over him, starting tonight.

“Woof!”

Jet was going to be my special helper for this mission. I was stuck frying bread, and Fran was a growing girl who needed her sleep. Plus, she needed to man the food cart tomorrow.

I’m counting on you, Jet.

“Arf!”

The Black Tail was inundated the following day. Rumors of the delicious curry bread spread, and over two hundred

people were standing in line for it. Making more than necessary last night was the right call.

Unfortunately, Fran was dressed in her normal gear rather than her maid outfit. We might still get attacked, so we had decided to prioritize mobility over adorability. Oh, maid outfit, I barely knew ye.

In the end, no thugs came to harass us, and the day went surprisingly well. Not that I wanted something bad to happen.

Noble Dish had hired some adventurers to be their guards today. It was a sudden employment, based on the events of the day before. Rumors were going around about how the owner of the establishment really cared about his customers.

In fact, there was a guy talking about the Noble Dish in our line right now. Very loudly, in fact. I identified the overeager fan and discovered...

Lie, Acting, and Threaten.

The man was a paid shill of the worst kind. His stats and skills marked him as a thug. I couldn't imagine him paying someone an honest compliment if he tried. I was getting more suspicious now. I really wished Jet would come back soon so we could set the record straight.

Just then, a quarrel broke out in the line. A man who was trying to cut in got rowdy with the people around him. Colbert and Fran rushed to control the situation.

When they got there, the man was already pinned down, having had the misfortune of trying to cut into a line of adventurers.

He was acting strangely though. Despite being held to the ground, he continued to scream utter gibberish. Was he on some kind of drug?

I Identified him and discovered he was under the Possessed status effect. What kind of status ailment was that? Did it mean that this guy wasn't necessarily a bad person? My crazy drug hypothesis was gaining ground fast.

As the man flailed about, Fran stuffed a curry bread into his mouth. It should cure him of his status ailment, if that was the root cause. Indeed, his status went back to normal right away, and he seemed to regain his senses.

Colbert asked him why he was going crazy, but the man didn't seem to know. He didn't remember anything after drinking at one of the pubs in the slums. Maybe his drug of choice was just plain old alcohol.

"Thank you for your continued cooperation."

"Sure thing. All yours, buddy."

"Yes, sir. Come on, let's get going."

"Y-yeah...urk."

Our little episode looked like it happened by pure chance. Today was going so smoothly that I was beginning to get suspicious.

Well, I guess there was one problem. An intense-looking man had joined the line. He looked to be either an adventurer or a mercenary. While the man didn't bother our customers, his mere presence was enough to intimidate them. A lot of folks squirmed. They were too deep in the line to leave, but they were too scared to ask the burly man to go, either.

He was there because he'd heard about the healing - effects of our curry bread. Cure Potions were invaluable among the adventuring crowd, and any item that claimed to do the same thing for a measly ten gold was worth buying in bulk. Still, our shelf life wasn't great, so they would be much better off buying actual potions.

“Whoops, I guess I said too much.”

Colbert was the culprit all along. The B-Rank’s - endorsement of a tasty cure-all food was the cause of the curry bread’s boom among adventurers.

While the man looked intimidating to the general public, at least he wasn’t a bother. He added to our sales, and I imagined he would deter any thug who wanted to shake us down. We ended up letting him stay in line.

There was another drunken outburst before the day came to an end, but soon it was time to go back to the Chefs’ Guild.

Being on the lookout all day was taking its toll on me...
Had the YTA given up on their antics?

I kept my eyes open on our way back to the guild hall, but no one came to attack us. A frontal attack would’ve been foolish with Colbert and the others around.

The other food carts had already been returned by the time we arrived. All the owners seemed to know each other, since most of them were native to Bulbola. They filled the lobby of the guild hall, chatting away and exchanging information.

A new figure emerged, then. It was the Count’s youngest. He had his posse with him, as usual. Jet wasn’t around, though. Had he gotten a new lead elsewhere? I knew how smart he was and trusted his judgment.

“That was some fine cooking today!”

“You’re going to win for sure!”

The Count’s son wasn’t surrounded by his usual posse of kitchen staff but rather his bodyguards and the tradesman in charge of his supplies. Some aristocratic-looking folk were there too, doubtless trying get into the Count’s good graces. The Count’s youngest was as arrogant

as aristocrats came. He definitely didn't seem the sort to prostrate himself for the sake of his people.

As I continued my harsh criticism, someone approached Fran to talk to her. His lack of presence startled me. Since we weren't in battle, we weren't fully alert. All the same, for him to sneak up on us... I was impressed.

I looked up and saw why.

"Good evening."

"Evening."

"I am the owner of the Dragonhead. The name's Phelms."

He was the former A-Rank adventurer and current owner of the award-winning Dragonhead. He had wavy blonde hair and narrow eyes. His clothes clung to his tall and well-built body. I reckoned him about one hundred and eighty centimeters. He had proportionally long legs and arms, too. His gentle smile had captivated more than his fair share of women, and the wrinkles around his eyes didn't subtract from the gentleman's charm. I still thought he looked like a spry forty-year-old.

I identified him again, just to be sure. His age hadn't changed, and he was human. How much anti-aging cream did he use? Not that any of us needed it right now. Still, I knew some old aristocrat lady would pay him a lot of gold for his secret.

"Hi, I'm Fran."

"I had my staff buy me some of your curry bread."

What's this? Was he going to criticize our product?

"There are still foods I have yet to sample, after all. I heard your teacher was the one who made it."

"Yeah, it was all Teacher's idea."

“I think it’s brilliant. Tell your teacher he moved the heart of an old man.”

He shook Fran’s hand. Honestly, I was happy to receive compliments from a chef of his caliber.

Tell him I’m happy to hear that.

“Thanks. Teacher’s happy to hear that.”

“You and your teacher are welcome to visit my store any time. If you’ll excuse me.”

He wished us luck in the tournament and went on his way. His gentlemanly demeanor almost made me fall for him.

Soon, the other chefs came to greet Fran, having waited for the right time. After all, she was cold and expressionless, which made her difficult to approach. They told her how much they loved curry bread—as delicious as it was original.

I heard someone say, “That sword of yours scared me, you know. Made it hard to talk to you.” Was I the reason the other chefs avoided her the other day? As I faced a mild existential crisis, the Count’s youngest son approached.

“Hoo boy, here he comes.”

“Be careful he doesn’t tell his daddy on you.”

“He might not be a cook, but he keeps himself clean.”

“You watch yourself around him, all right?”

The chefs scattered, whispering to Fran. It was clear that no one had any love for the guy.

“I am Weint. Owner of the Noble Dish. I had one of your curry bread things, too.”

“Hm.”

“It is a very novel snack. I think it’s quite good.”

“Hm.”

“The best of luck to us both.”

Lie after lie came out of his mouth. This bastard even wiped his palms after shaking hands with Fran. He was scrubbing them, too! Don’t think I didn’t see that, noble boy!

“It was most gracious of you to flatter even the lowliest of beastmen.”

“Oh, it’s nothing much. You just need to remember to smile.”

Once they’d moved off, Weint and his cronies ran their mouths as if we couldn’t hear them.

We can hear you just fine, asshole! If you don’t like sulling your hands, how about I just chop ‘em off for you? Where the hell was Jet?! I needed evidence to justify taking this smug bastard down.

“People are only buying it for its novelty. This curry bread is a crude dish by itself.”

We’ll let you off today, but just you wait...!

We finished our business at the Chefs’ Guild and returned to the restaurant. I was irritated beyond belief about what happened, although Fran didn’t seem to pay it any mind.

“Teacher.”

Got it.

Fran stood alert, staring at the supposedly empty restaurant.

We sensed the auras of a few people inside. The lights were off, and they were smart enough to diminish their hostility. Whoever they were, they weren’t friendly. Our uninvited guests were total home invaders, and they

deserved nothing less than annihilation, although it needed to be bloodless. We didn't want to get our workplace dirty.

We're going to have to play it quiet.

"All right."

I used Silence to mute the sound of the opening door, only to find it still locked. Did they come in through a window? We would need to find out. We opened the door slightly and peeked through. There were no immediate signs of life. They must be hiding behind the upholstery or something. Were they planning to catch Fran off guard?

Unfortunately, their best efforts were no match before our Sense skills.

I'll take the one on the right, you take the one on the left.

Hm.

I cast a dome of Silence on the room and launched a lightning spell at the man hiding behind the door. His mouth opened and closed in a silent scream as the electricity jolted through him.

Behind me, Fran took care of the other with a well-placed Stun Bolt. It didn't take long for us to incapacitate the rest of our attackers. They were quite strong this time: all of them over Level 20. If Fran were an ordinary D-Rank adventurer, they would've killed her. We lined up the four men and began our questioning.

I woke the one who looked the strongest, as he was probably the leader. Fran slapped him awake.

"You up?"

"What the hell... Get this string off of me!"

"That depends on how well you answer. Why are you here?"

"Hah! You think I'm gonna tell you? You won't get away with this, I swear!"

Ten minutes later...

The home invaders sat on their knees, quivering quietly. They were much more well behaved now that their faces were bent out of shape.

"So you attacked me to prevent me from going to the contest tomorrow?"

"Y-yes, ma'am..."

They were supposed to ambush Fran alone in the restaurant. We were getting ambushed way too much lately. When Fran asked who sent them, they mentioned a familiar name.

"Linford? He's the one behind this?"

"Yes."

The ringleader behind the rogue mercenary group allegedly working with the Ythra Trade Association, Linford was an old mage with a fragile build. Apparently, he was staying at the mansion with his crew. This man was one of them.

What is going on in this town?

We got in the way of the YTA's plans when we took their Soul Essence, but why would they try to prevent us from participating in a cooking contest? I couldn't see the connection.

I would love to bring one of the YTA bosses in for questioning...

Guess all we can do is wait for Jet.

"Yeah."

Meanwhile, elsewhere...

"What on earth is going on?!"

Why wouldn't anything go as planned?! *I am Brook Christon, the second son of the Marquis Christon! I should dictate how things happen in this city!*

"What is the meaning of this, Zelyse?! You said there would be riots all over the streets!"

I glared at the man in front of me. He was wearing that ever-present detestable grin, but at least he was useful.

Zelyse was an alchemist. A student of the great alchemist Eugene, who now worked for the Adventurers' Guild. In fact, Zelyse was the reason his master was thrown out. He lived in the Bulbolan underground, taking part in illegal dealings to further his means. He lacked the fear of the gods that normally kept alchemists in line, conducting crystal implantation in humans and experimenting to create monster-human hybrids. He had talent enough to spare and had readily accepted the job I offered him.

Zelyse's specialty poisons proved useful in dealing with women who refused my advances, along with any of the rabble who had any ideas about telling my father.

Because of his usefulness, Zelyse had almost become a confidant.

"Yes. It appears someone keeps getting in our way."

"Who is it?"

Had someone figured out my plan...?

"Do you know of a food cart called the Black Tail?"

"Never heard of it."

A food cart? What did a food cart have to do with it?

“They are one of the participants in the cooking contest.”

“What of it then?!”

“I hear that their food uses a particular magic plant. Cure Turmeric. They say just a bite of their curry bread will make all your ills go away.”

“Are you certain of this?”

It was unlikely that a mere food cart could afford to use Cure Turmeric, or any magic plant for that matter.

“Yes. I sent someone to fetch a sample. It does have curative properties.”

“Damn it. So they’re the ones getting in my way.”

“Indeed. They are selling their wares for a mere ten gold.”

“And it’s selling like hot cakes?”

“I hear they’re selling five thousand pieces a day.”

“Meaning whoever eats at Noble Dish will likely eat there as well.”

I didn’t think they knew of my design, but they must be taken care of. They were getting in my way.

“Bring that shop down.”

“Attempts have already been made, and they have all failed.”

“They have guards?”

“Yes. A B-Rank adventurer called Steelclaw Colbert is among them. The girls manning the cashiers are a D-Rank party.”

“And what of Linford’s men? That’s why he’s in on this operation.”

Linford was a researcher like Zelyse. The alchemist had introduced me to him months ago. The old mage was apparently running a mercenary outfit. It was made up of combat veterans, although some of them had criminal records so long I had to intervene just so they could get into the city. These men were even worse than Zelyse, but at least they were good at unnecessary violence.

They were registered under the Ythra Trade Association, though they answered directly to me.

“We’ve sent some of our strongest out there, but...”

“They were defeated? The owner is a measly D-Rank!”

“Well, not a single one of our men has returned. I’ve even sent some of the YTA men, just to make sure. But they haven’t contacted us, either. It’s like they completely disappeared.”

“What...? Is someone secretly protecting her?”

“I do not know. What I do know is that this D-Rank adventurer has ties to the Phyllian royalty.”

“The Phyllians, you say?”

“According to my sources, yes.”

“She might have a personal guard attached to her... Find out more about this girl.”

“I am looking into it, rest assured. However, given that she only recently arrived, there isn’t much information. She has ties to the Lucille Trade Association, but you know how tight-lipped they can be.”

How were we supposed to exploit her weaknesses when we didn’t know anything about her? This lowly adventurer kept getting in the way of my plans! Damn it all!

“Shall I mobilize the mercenaries and YTA tradesmen?” I asked. “I doubt she would be able to hold her own against

thirty men."

"You could, but wouldn't your father take notice?"

"Damn it."

My father had men loyal to his cause. If I moved too quickly, my plans for a coup might be exposed. Loathsome old man! If not for him, I wouldn't have to bother with any of this!

"Brook, you are not suited to become count," my father had said.

How dare he deny my birthright! My numbskull elder brother was only good as dumb muscle! He had neither the knowledge nor the pride of a true aristocrat! I wanted to kill him every time he was friendly to the rabble. I was the rightful heir, not him! If my father couldn't see that, I had no choice but to make him.

I would throw Bulbola into chaos and pin the blame on my father. I would kill my fool brother in the confusion, and then I would be Lord of the House of Christon.

I tasked Zelyse with concocting the chaos. I originally planned to contaminate the city's water supply with his poison, but Zelyse suggested our current plan. A plan so destructive it would be enough to throw the entire state of Bulbola into disarray. I adopted his plan. Many would surely die, most of them commoners. A small price to pay for me to become Marquis Christon.

The crux of this plan was my other fool brother, Weint.

Weint was a talentless little brat. He was the youngest and apparently touched by the spirit of cooking as a child. It moved him enough to pursue a lowly profession as a cook. He'd pursued it genuinely too, not content to let it be merely a secondary source of income. The brat opened a restaurant.

Not that it flourished by virtue of his skills—he was talentless. I tasted his cooking once. It was nothing special.

He'd lost interest in the culinary world long ago and only kept his store open for the fame. Now he was a third-rate cook, serving third-rate food at extortionary prices.

Still, I needed his restaurant to further my plans. Oh, the look on his face when he passed the preliminaries... The fool actually thought he had talent! He only got through after I greased the palms of the Chefs' Guild committee, and his regulars were other nobles who wanted to get in the good graces of my father and brother. Weint seemed to have mistaken their brownnosing for actual approval.

I had underestimated his idiocy, though. I did not expect him to hire such loose-lipped thugs to intimidate the other stores. And his ploy to play the victim himself to try and gain approval? The fool. The Chefs' Guild had already begun investigations, although I supposed I could convince them to hold off his disqualification until after he served his purpose. The guild might seem like it was filled with stubborn snobs, but not all of them were unflinching. Some of them gladly took my donations.

That was how I got this plan rolling in the first place.

I supplied Weint with cursed Mana Water to use in his cooking. Linford and Zelyse specifically manufactured it for that purpose.

I did not know the specifics, but this Fiend Water cursed anyone who consumed it, causing them to become Possessed. Consume enough of it, and it sent them flying into a blind rage. The genius of Fiend Water lay with its timed release, allowing the citizens of Bulbola to disperse and go about their business before they went berserk.

Not that I told Weint, of course. I just let him know it added a little something special to his "already delicious

cooking."

I expected the Noble Dish would get three thousand customers per day throughout the contest. That made close to ten thousand in total, more than enough to send Bulbola into a chaotic riot. Then we would use Zelyse's familiars to subdue the city.

After that, the Count would have to take responsibility. Abdication at best, criminal charges at worst. All for failing to protect Granzell's Window to the World.

The mere image of my father in court was enough to cheer me up, but now came a stumbling block to my plans. Bread which could cure anything... How dare she create such an abomination! Zelyse mentioned that while crime rates were up compared to last year, more guards were posted in anticipation. I had to get rid of Black Tail one way or another.

"Bring him in."

"Are you sure? He might make more of a splash than you expect."

"We have no choice!"

"Understood. I'll call him right away."

Ten minutes passed.

A giant of a man, over two meters tall, stood before me. His bronze skin was covered with innumerable scars. He was muscled to the point where armor seemed unnecessary. You would be forgiven for thinking that he had Ogre blood.

This was Linford's strongest mercenary, a former C-Rank adventurer held back only by his temper. In truth, he was as strong as a B-Rank. He sparred with one of my men, a C-Rank adventurer himself, and beat him to submission in an instant.

The giant was named Theraclede and had earned the moniker of the Mad Warrior. He was a blood knight, interested only in fighting the strong in the name of - becoming stronger himself. Fighting his companions was a given, and he killed his sparring partners more often than not.

When Theraclede was expelled from the Adventurers' Guild, he wandered the continent of Chrome and racked up quite the bounty for himself. He was once employed by a certain country, but when he got to the battlefield he slaughtered everyone, friend and foe.

One of his victims happened to be the prince of the country that hired him. Having lost its commander, the army was thrown into disarray. Inevitably, they lost their claim on the territory. A huge bounty was placed on him then, but it seemed to please the Mad Warrior... Now he had a guaranteed stream of strong opponents.

I could never understand him. He seemed to relegate the task of thinking to his muscles, but I knew that he was immensely strong.

"I have a job for you."

"Been a while since I let loose. I hope this job of yours will give me that chance."

"Worry not. It's not like you're good for anything else."

"Ha ha ha! You're smarter than you look."

Theraclede laughed, though I knew not why. His - capriciousness was the main reason I'd avoided using him. But I couldn't afford that anymore. If this adventurer was as strong as Zelyse said, maybe they would kill each other.

"Woof!"

"Hm? What was that...?"

I heard a barking noise after Theraclede had left the room. Strange. I didn't keep pets.

"Perhaps the stress is getting to me."

It sounded like a large dog...but it must be my imagination.

Chapter 5: Demonic Metamorphosis

After dealing with our uninvited guests, I got back to preparing the bread.

I felt some people coming toward the shop, but neither of us were alarmed.

“Teacher.”

Looks like Jet’s back. Who’s with him, though?

“Whoever it is, there’s four of them.”

Jet brought four other people with him. Who were they? And what did they want at this hour? I didn’t think they were enemies, but these were still legitimate questions.

“Bark! Bark, bark!”

“Coming.”

We opened the door, and in walked our four employees.

Colbert was leaning on Judith, limping as he struggled to stay upright. His right leg was a mess. Blood seeped through the rags they’d used to stop the bleeding. What the hell happened?

“You’re hurt,” Fran said in surprise.

I could imagine why she was shocked. Colbert was as strong as B-Ranks could get. I didn’t think we could beat him in a fair fight. It was unthinkable that Colbert could’ve been so badly injured in the city.

“Well, this is embarrassing. I made a misstep was all.”

“He was hurt trying to protect us!”

“I think he would’ve won if he were alone...”

“We’re sorry for holding you back.”

Taking off his bandages, we saw the gash running from his right calf all the way to his thigh. It exposed raw flesh and was deep enough that we could see the bone. On Earth, such a sight would have made me faint.

Their attacker initially targeted the Crimson Maidens and injured Colbert when he tried to protect them... Whoever this attacker was, they must’ve been strong.

“We drenched the wound in potions, but I don’t think that’s enough.”

“His foot was only torn to begin with!”

His injuries were much graver than we thought.

“It’s a good thing Jet showed up when he did.”

“He rushed in just as our attacker was about to deal the killing blow and countered him so hard he ran away.”

“He came from the shadows like some kind of assassin.”

So that’s why they came here together.

“Let’s fix you up. Greater Heal.”

“Whoa... I can feel my wounds closing up.”

Fran’s Greater Heal instantly stopped the bleeding. Fortunately, it hadn’t been too long since the attack. Colbert had still lost a lot of blood, but at least it wouldn’t get infected.

“To think the Swordceress could use such powerful Healing Magic... I feel like even more of a loser now.”

We ignored Lydia’s rambling and sat Colbert in a chair.

He couldn’t walk straight. His leg was still numb from the initial shock, and he needed the help of the three girls to sit down.

It wasn't exactly the time for a meal, so I told Fran to get them something warm to drink. The four of them thanked her for the tea, which eased some of the tension in Colbert's body.

"What happened?"

"We had just finished eating dinner and were on our way to the lodge when it happened."

"I thought I'd be a gentleman and walk these three home."

It was then that a giant of a man blocked their way.

He asked for the girls by name and made it plain that he was no stranger.

"He was clearly after the three of them."

"You sure?"

"Yes. He even asked us if we worked at the Black Tail."

"We barely had time to answer before he attacked us."

"I almost peed myself. But don't tell anyone."

The hitman knew their names and faces. It wasn't much of a stretch to say that he would know where they stayed. That's why he knew where to strike.

"Do you know who did it?"

"Yeah. He introduced himself, after all."

"Really?"

Why would an assassin introduce himself?

"The Mad Warrior Theraclede. I always thought the rumors about him were made up."

"He's a lot worse than they say."

"Thera—who?"

"You don't know him, Swordceress?"

“Hm.”

Fran nodded, to the shock of everyone present. He was apparently quite notorious.

“All right, let me fill you in.”

Lydia explained who Theraclede was. He gained a bounty on his head in the most horrible ways. He would lose himself to bloodlust on the battlefield and massacre both friend and foe. During one of his blood-addled frenzies, he accidentally killed the prince of the kingdom employing him. He didn’t sound like someone we wanted to get involved with.

He was a C-Rank when he got kicked out of the Adventurers’ Guild but had grown far stronger since. I hoped Lydia was only telling tall tales, but given what had happened today...

“It’s all true.”

“Jet saved my life. A Darkness Wolf’s ambush is deadly no matter how strong you are. He got some good hits in before chasing him away.”

“Good boy, Jet.”

“Arf...”

The fact remained, however, that Jet couldn’t beat Theraclede, despite having the element of surprise. Jet knew this, and although he was happy for the compliment, he was still annoyed.

The three girls looked glum. Even Maya, who always seemed to be smiling, was affected. The self-proclaimed cool girl, Lydia looked wracked with worry. I didn’t blame them, considering what just happened... I wouldn’t be surprised if they wanted to quit.

However, my anxiety proved baseless. Judith looked more determined than ever to come to work tomorrow.

Seeing that fired up the injured Colbert, and he chimed in with a proud affirmation of his own.

“Then can I count on you to show up tomorrow?”

“No problem!”

“We would love to.”

“Let’s do our best.”

“We’ll show that giant gorilla what we’re made of.”

Good thing we got adventurers to man the stall. The average person would’ve bailed on me already, if Theraclede hadn’t killed them outright.

Colbert took us to one of the Knight Guard’s stations to report the assault. At first, I was worried whether the officer would believe us.

“Are you sure, Mr. Colbert?”

“Yep, he almost did me in.”

“By the gods... I’ll file the report right away!”

Colbert was a bit of a celebrity, and the knight on duty believed his testimony right away.

The assassins sent by Phillip Christon also mentioned Theraclede during our little talk. The Knight Guard hadn’t been sure about the rumors about the Mad Warrior being in Bulbola, but tonight’s incident was proof.

The Knight Guard would tighten security around the city, making it more difficult for the other side to try anything funny.

Judith and the others decided to stay at the Adventurers’ Guild for the night. It was a good call. Any assassin would think twice about attacking a building full of adventurers.

“What about you, Swordceress? Will you stay with us?”

“Hm? I’m good.”

“But...”

“Besides, I have a lot of chores to run tonight.”

They couldn’t expect us to sit it out now that things had escalated. Jet had returned with the intelligence we’d waited all day for. It was time to take out the trash.

“Hold on! Are you gonna go looking for him?”

“No. I have somewhere else to be.”

“Well, all right...but it’s dangerous to go alone.”

“I won’t be. Jet’s with me.”

“Woof!”

Colbert tried to stop her but ended up shaking his head in resignation.

“Okay...but remember we still have a cooking contest to win. Whatever business you have to settle, make sure you wrap it up by morning.”

“Sure. No problem.”

Fran nodded and climbed onto Jet’s back as he shifted back to his original size.

You found something, didn’t you, Jet?

“Woof!”

“Take us there.”

“Bark, bark!”

Ride on, boy!

“Awooo!”

Jet howled, crouched into position, and leapt into a full sprint. A couple of Air Hops later, he was sprinting across the rooftops.

“Feels good.”

Fran squinted through the night wind. It was cold, but the Black Cat Set she wore provided ample Cold Resistance.

Good thing it's late.

"Arf?"

Jet was running at full speed and full size in the middle of a populated city. If we tried this in the afternoon, it would create a panic. Even at night, not all the townspeople went undisturbed. I heard screams coming from windows, undoubtedly from people who were stargazing. I silently apologized to them.

Are we headed for the YTA mansion?

Jet was running in that direction.

I was mistaken, however. Jet passed the mansion and instead landed in front of the smaller residence next to it. It appeared small by comparison, but it still stood out in the middle of the residential district.

We started out by concealing our auras, but Jet decided we needed further concealment before going in. He used his Dark Magic to kill all traces of our presence. If our direwolf was being this cautious, we should be really careful. Fran and I further deadened our auras.

Once we were completely concealed, Jet jumped - silently onto the rooftop.

"Woof."

There?

Jet shrank himself, and quietly stalked the roof.

We followed him along and stopped when he did. We crept along and looked down through a window.

This room right here?

"Woof!"

Two men were in the room. I Identified them both and discovered one of them was Brook Christon.

Christon? Is that the Count's middle child?

“Arf!”

He was talking to a man called Facinas Tormeo. Who was this guy? All we could do now was watch and listen.

“Theraclede failed? That useless brute!”

“He has gravely injured Colbert in the process. The girls will be helpless without him.”

They were talking about the attack. So this was our puppet master.

“Then send someone else to finish the job! We have to stop the sale of that accursed curry bread! It’s cancelling the effects of the Fiend Water in Weint’s cooking! It’s ruining my plans!”

“R-right away, my lord!”

“Be quick. We’re too far in to back out now. I don’t care if you cause a riot. I don’t care what you do to their employees. All that matters is that you take care of that Fran girl tonight!”

That Fran girl was right here.

I couldn’t understand the finer points of their conversation, but it sounded like they had mixed some sort of poison into Noble Dish’s menu. A poison whose effects were nullified by eating our curry bread.

Damn, I guess we unknowingly got in the way of his plans.

“Shocking.”

So that’s why he’s targeting us...

How did the Count raise his sons?! The eldest was the only one that came out right. The second son was plotting terrible things underground, and the third sounded like he was helping!

“Damn it all... Does she know how much effort it took to procure the Cure Turmeric...!”

“Is Fiend Water impossible to manufacture without it?”

“That’s what Zelyse says. We wanted to reverse its properties to create the ultimate poison. But to cook such awful food with it and sell it at a mere ten gold... She might be stupider than my brother.”

Fran tensed. *Awful food?*

Fran, calm down! You’re letting your murderous intent show!

Her aura was enough to make Brook and Facinas shiver. They stopped, noted the odd draft, and continued their conversation. It was a good thing neither of them were fighters.

It’s okay, Fran. Just stay calm.

Hm...

“The YTA has made mistake after mistake. They might be too dangerous to keep around.”

“Then dissolve it and create another association. I’ll take care of the paperwork.”

“As you wish.”

Brook was the mastermind behind the YTA. The trade association was a front to cover his illegal activities.

But what should we do? We might be eyewitnesses to this conspiracy, but we needed solid proof if we wanted anyone to believe us. Should we apprehend Brook? Scum

that he was, he was still the Count's son. Apprehending him without any evidence would be reckless.

We could start with Tormeo...but the disappearance of one of the YTA higher-ups was likely to raise suspicion. As I mulled over our next step, I felt Jet's aura disappear.

Uh, Jet?

He was going after Tormeo, who was now by himself in the room. Jet attacked the man from the shadows and knocked him out without a sound.

Damn it, Jet, what are you doing?!

Well, no turning back now. I used Silence to mute everything in the room and opened the window with Telekinesis. Jet jumped out, holding Tormeo in his mouth. His actions might have been drastic, but this was probably the only way we could start gathering evidence. They seemed to have their Fiend Water stocked and ready to go, so we needed proof by the end of the night.

Good job... I guess.

“Arf.”

But don't go running off before I tell you next time, got it?

I yanked his tail to show him I meant business. Jet nodded sheepishly.

“W-woof.”

Jet must've taken evidence gathering as his personal mission, apprehending a known witness as soon as he was all alone. I really wished that Fran and Jet would think a little more before they acted...

Anyway, we're booking it!

“Woof!”

Right!

We headed to the Count's estate.

We were going to turn Tormeo over to the Count. Extracting information from him was easy enough. He couldn't fight at all and spilled everything when he saw how big Jet was. Of course, it was part of his plan to fool us, so we still had to be on our toes. It was a good thing we had Essence of Falsehood.

Jet had been feeling slightly down since we reached town. Everyone was afraid of him. It would've been worse if not for the kids at the orphanage. He deserved a pat on the back for putting up with it.

Despite Tormeo's efforts to trick us, we got the information we needed. Just when he thought he had us fooled, we revealed that we knew his plans. His face went a ghastly shade of blue.

He was confident it wouldn't take much to trick a young girl and that there was no way he would lose a battle of words. Having his entire scheme exposed was like a bucket of cold water to his face. Tormeo looked resigned.

I'd expected to find a smart mob flunky installed in the upper echelons of the YTA, so I was surprised to find out he was more than that. He was the head of the Tormeo Trade Association, a large association affiliated with the YTA. He had Trade and Calculate, but most of his points seemed to have gone into Lie and Threaten. He was one hell of a merchant, one way or another.

Brook, the Count's second son, was a shareholder of his influential company—which sold beauty products to the nobility of Bulbola. But the scope of his trade association was nothing compared to Brook's plans. The Count's son planned to mix Mana Water into his brother's cooking, making people go berserk for the sake of his coup d'état.

Thousands of lives were at stake. We needed to put a stop to it.

Linfold, and an alchemist called Zelyse, were responsible for developing the Fiend Water. Zelyse was Eugene's former apprentice, the one that got him expelled from the Alchemists' Guild. He'd stayed in Bulbola to continue his illegal research under the protection of the Ythra Trade Association. Now that we had Tormeo, it wouldn't be difficult to get him testify against Brook and Zelyse.

We stuffed Tormeo in another sack and carried him, still struggling, to the Count's estate. Sebastian came out to greet us, as was protocol.

"Again...?"

"Hm."

His gaze immediately locked on to the burlap sack. The butler seemed to have given up trying to part Fran from her luggage and asked no further questions.

"I shall inform the prince and princess."

I thought about going straight to the Count, but maybe a little consultation with Fult and Satya was in order. The Count was more likely to grant the Phyllian royalty an audience, after all.

"Fran...you have another sack with you?" Fult said, sighing.

Satya mirrored his exasperation. Their past experience with Fran and burlap bags told them exactly what to expect.

"Just so we're clear, what is in that bag?"

"This guy."

"Oh! Goodness, I knew it..."

"Mmphhh!"

Satya let out a small yelp when the bound man rolled out of the bag, although she wasn't as startled as before. She probably had built up some resistance.

"And this is?"

"Bad guy."

"If you have to tie him up and gag him, I suppose he is."

"One of the Count's middle son's cronies."

The other children were asleep, leaving only Fult, Satya, and Sellid to listen.

Fran told them what had happened, and I mentally thanked the Phyllians for hanging on her every word. In the end, they understood that Tormeo was helping Brook in some sort of evil conspiracy.

"This is...terrible!"

"Young Brook, you say..." said Sellid. "Not only is he an accomplished tradesman, but he holds council over the trade affairs of Bulbola. He would have the capacity for as many underhand dealings as he wanted."

Sellid was right. What happened to the orphanage was probably his doing as well. After all, the orphanage was his main competition in the contest.

"We must tell Lord Rhodus."

"Yes, but will he believe us...?"

Fult was right. Even with Tormeo as our witness, it was doubtful that the Count would believe his own son was plotting to overthrow him.

"Still, we must act."

"You're right."

The royal twins looked at each other and nodded. While the matter had nothing to do with their kingdom, the lives of countless civilians were still at stake. They weren't the type to sit on their hands and watch. Their royal dignity wouldn't allow it.

Sellid watched them with a thoughtful look. He understood the risks of interfering with another kingdom's family matters. Seedrun was still fresh on everyone's minds, after all.

"Your Highnesses," he said, knowing his advice would likely be ignored. "I understand that you wish to use your authority for good, but this might escalate into an international incident. You must let Bulbola take care of her own."

"It'll be too late by then."

"Indeed."

Watching the exchange made me think that Fult and Satya must have inherited their sense of justice from Sellid. It was as if his objections actually strengthened their resolve. It was such an effective way of instilling strong values, I almost thought Sellid was doing it on purpose.

"In any case, we shall discuss this matter with Count Rhodus."

"Hm."

"There is one thing we must do before that," Fult said, glaring at Tormeo.

The intense look was unexpectedly intimidating on such a beautiful face.

"Urgh..."

Tormeo was uncomfortable. Keeping up the pressure, Fult leaned in and whispered:

“We are the heirs of Phyllius.”

“Mgh?”

“Understand? You have already been put under the curse of our Godsword.”

“Hrngh!”

Those who brought harm to the House of Phyllius were cursed by the Godsword. Tormeo was aware of this rumor. The prince stared into his fearful eyes.

“We are going to have an audience with the Count now. Make sure that your testimony is true. Or else.”

Fult let out a short burst of demonic energy. To an untrained layman like Tormeo, it felt murderous. He knew then that the prince had some supernatural abilities. As soon as the tradesman’s gag was removed, he screamed.

“All right! I’ll do anything you say! Just please, not the curse!”

“Very good. So long as you don’t make an enemy out of us, you shall not suffer its consequences.”

Tormeo would be less inclined to pull any funny business now that he believed the curse of the Godsword was on him.

“I shall call for Count Rhodus.”

“Please.”

Sellid let out a resigned sigh as he left the room.

The Marquis came soon after.

He had a grave look on his face today, quite unlike the annoyed expression he wore the last time the prince called for him. Sebastian must’ve told him about the sack. He was expecting something now.

He let out a surprised cry at seeing Tormeo laid out on the floor.

“What is Tormeo doing here...?”

“You know him?”

“Of course. He is the owner of a popular line of beauty products in Bulbola. Our nobles love his goods.”

“He is on friendly terms with your son, is he not?”

“Yes. Brook, my second, is on the board of his trade association.”

Rhodus knew that whatever Tormeo was here for, it wasn’t good. He sat down to prepare himself for the revelation.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Yes. Tormeo will tell you everything you want to know. Go on, then.”

“Y-yes, lord!”

Leave it to royalty to master giving orders. Tormeo showed no hesitation when he exposed Brook’s plans. The Count’s countenance fell as the conversation went on.

At first, he was angry at the preposterous notion, but turned pale as he realized that Tormeo was telling the truth. I felt sorry for him. As much as he took the side of his own flesh and blood, the old aristocrat knew truth when he heard it.

“I thought he would rebel against me, but to put the lives of our citizens at stake...” the Count mumbled. “Oh, my son...”

The hardest thing for a father was to suspect his own son of wrongdoing.

“N-no,” he said. “We need proof. More evidence...”

"We have just heard the testimony of Brook's trusted confidant. What further proof do we need?"

"Given the man's circumstances, surely..."

Surely we were threatening him into speaking falsely. But the Count didn't say it out loud. Finishing his sentence would've meant accusing the prince and princess of lying.

"I apologize. This is hard for me to take in."

"I understand."

"I've known... I knew that either Phillip or Brook was using my seal without authorization..."

I almost forgot about that. The Count's investigation was quite thorough, but he couldn't bring himself to suspect his own son.

"Phillip is as simple as he is straight forward. He isn't capable of conspiring in the shadows. Which leaves the culprit as..."

Marquis Christon hung his head.

Inner conflict tore at him. On one hand, he must see to it that justice was done. But, on the other, he wanted to keep the whole thing under wraps. The incident would bring shame to the family. But insisting on obfuscation was difficult with Phyllian royalty around. Not taking immediate action would offend the Phyllians and also harm the lives of civilians.

He was weighing his options, trying to find the best possible solution.

Eventually, he came to his decision.

"Very well. I shall mobilize the Night Guard to apprehend my son along with his co-conspirators, the - mercenary and the alchemist."

"And we move tonight?"

"Yes. However, because of the festival, it will be difficult to mobilize the whole guard."

It would've been nice to call in the entire cavalry to arrest Brook, but it was better than nothing. The Count still looked hesitant, but at least he was taking action.

Less than an hour later, the city guard gathered at the manor and were told they were to arrest Brook and Weint on sight.

Fult and Satya would stay at the manor. If they got hurt meddling in another kingdom's business, Sellid would literally lose his head. They agreed to this plan only after his strong protests.

Of course, we were part of the strike team. Someone needed to lead the way.

Jet, can you feel where Brook is at?

"Woof!"

I see.

Brook wasn't in the house where we captured Tormeo but in the YTA estate. Jet pointed his nose in its direction.

"Brook's over there."

"That mansion..."

Marquis Christon gazed at the manor in the distance. He was hesitating, wondering why this strange girl had brought him here and accused his son of treason without solid evidence. All he had to go by was the testimony of a man who was clearly under duress.

We had no choice but to take the lead.

Fran.

"Hm."

"H-hey! Where are you going?!"

Fran dashed forward, ignoring the Marquis' complaints. Our target was the gatekeeper. Wasting time on polite questions might mean informing the people on the inside. The Count would be reassured once he knew Brook was in the building.

“Wha—”

Fran punched the guard in the solar plexus before he could utter a word. I had Identified him earlier to make sure and saw he was under the Criminal and Possessed status ailments. We caught him as he crumpled to the floor and brought him back to Count Christon and his troops.

We gagged and bound him, just in case. The man regained consciousness after a quick Heal.

“Mmmphh!”

“Quiet.”

“Hurgh!”

After a quick kick to the gut, the man curled up. After several more administrations, he finally knew enough to stop struggling.

“Wh-what are you doing with him?” the Count interrupted, his voice tinged with fear.

“Hm? Interrogation, of course.”

“It looks like torture to me... Who is he?”

“I dunno. He’s one of them, though.”

“And you have proof of this?”

“I know one when I see one.”

“So you don’t.”

The Count held his head in exasperation. Lacking Identify, he had no way of verifying the truth. I didn’t blame him for his lack of faith.

"I'm going to ask you some questions. Answer honestly, and I'll stop hurting you. Make noise, and I'll kill you."

The gatekeeper nodded, turning pale at the graveness in Fran's voice. We took off his gag, and he cowered in fearful anticipation.

"Who owns this mansion?"

"The Ythra Trade Association! I'm just a scrub! I don't know anything, I swear!"

He wasn't lying so far.

"The Ythra Trade Association?" a guard next to the Count muttered to himself.

He was an old veteran named Danan. He had excellent command over his squadrons, was as strong as a D-Rank adventurer, and had received many accolades in his day.

"The YTA works under the Tormeo Trade Association, meaning that it is tied to Master Brook. A dastardly organization."

"I see... Brook..."

Marquis Christon seemed completely oblivious to this fact, but his soldiers knew about the YTA. They were cunning but also had the protection of crooked aristocrats and trade associations. Any attempt at investigating the YTA never came to fruition.

This was clearly Brook's doing, but we had no hard evidence. Bringing the subject up would probably end with his saying, "I'll look into it," followed by a temporary halt of the YTA's shady activities.

"Is a man called Brook inside?"

"Yes, he is! The head of the YTA always sucks up to him! He's been in there for hours, he passes through those gates

all the time!"

"Last question. Do you do bad things?"

"W-well, I..."

"Hm."

Fran's kick sent jolts up the man's spine. He struggled to answer, in tears from the pain.

"I-I'm sorry! I'll talk! I'll talk, just please no more!"

"You should've done that from the start."

"We do bad things! Illegal things! Selling contraband, women, setting our competition's houses on fire, you name it!"

The YTA dealt with any illegal violent act outside the realm of the Tormeo Trade Association—TTA. They operated like the mob. Despite having different names, they were definitely the shadow arm of the TTA.

Even if their crimes ever came to light, Brook could just cut ties with them at his convenience. The crooked trade association was the perfect scapegoat.

"Does Brook know?"

"He must know, considering how much he frequents this place. Not to mention his ties to the TTA."

"Oh, Brook... How could you do this...?"

The Count was still in denial.

"They told me to take care of the body of one of Brook's sex slaves. He went at the girl too hard!"

"Such fool talk... My son would never..."

The Count uttered a weak defense. He knew it was true, but he didn't want to believe it.

"I told him he had no right to be my heir as long as he kept looking down on the common man... I thought it would

change his mind."

"I guess all it did was make him throw a tantrum."

"Oh, Brook... My son..."

A tantrum? I didn't think he'd plot to kill his own brother in a tantrum.

"Very well. If Brook is indeed here, I shall ask him personally. The testimony this man gave was sufficient. Arrest anyone who resists... Brook, as well."

"Yes, Lord Count!"

The soldiers stormed the gates. Half of them surrounded the estate while the rest charged through the mansion.

Brook's minions were still inside, but they were no match for fully armed soldiers. Try as they might, they were immediately subdued. I Identified them as we went and found they were all Possessed. I tried feeding one such aggressor some curry. I gave him the smooth kind, which Fran usually ate, instead of the chunky kind we used in our curry bread. We shoved a cup in his mouth and forced it down his gullet.

"Gaah!"

The man looked to be in pain. Choking on curry was preferable to staying Possessed, at least. The Fiend Water had produced this ailment and seemed to put its victims in a state of frenzy.

Brook had even slipped some to his own men. Soon, we would know why.

Now that I thought about it, the drunk who went - berserk near our stall the other day was Possessed, too. Fiend Water might have made its way beyond the Noble Dish. The situation could be worse than I thought.

Five minutes had gone since we began our raid.

We reached the room where Brook was supposed to be.

Is he here?

“Bark!”

There was no mistaking Jet’s Aura Sense. Brook should be behind this door.

Fran kicked it in. Brook was rummaging through his desk as if looking for something. He had heard the noise and was preparing to escape with his valuables.

“Wh-who are you?!”

“Hm. I don’t need to introduce myself to scum like you.”

“This is breaking and entering!”

“It isn’t, son. This is an investigation.”

“F-Father! Why are you...?”

“I should ask you the same. What are you doing in this den of thieves?”

“I have no idea what you are—”

Brook began listing his excuses, but something else caught my eye. Brook was Possessed, as well. How? Did he drink the Fiend Water, too? If so, why?

As I puzzled over it, a soldier came forward.

“We’ve gained control of the mansion. We found some wanted criminals and have taken them into custody. They’re all gathered in the garden. We also found girls we suspect to be victims of illegal slavery and secured them.”

Criminals and slaves. There was your solid evidence. No one could plead ignorance now.

"Brook, tell your story to the Knight Guard. Your flimsy excuses won't be of any help."

"No... No, no, NO!!! Why is this happening?!"

Did he really think no one would notice? As far as covering up crimes go, Brook was pretty sloppy. The YTA were so brazen that it guaranteed someone would eventually expose them.

He might be smart enough to plot, but he wasn't cautious enough to cover his tracks. To begin with, it would be plainly obvious that any riot which caused the impeachment of his own father and the death of his brother would have to be conceived by one of the Christons. They were the rulers of Bulbola after all. He hadn't thought this through.

Well, we managed to avoid a coup because of his sloppiness. All we had to do now was arrest Weint, and we could prevent the Fiend Water epidemic from spreading. The city could even use our Cure Turmeric curry. Not that they had a choice, considering I used the entire stock of Cure Turmeric to make it.

Anyway, we should start by feeding the people in this mansion to cure them of the Possessed status.

What flavor should I go with? Ultra-hot turned out to be ultra-popular, so we didn't have much leftover. I guess we could feed them Plain and Hot. I was about to take out my curry bread when Brook let out a menacing scream.

"Graaargh!"

What's this? Was he becoming enraged out of desperation?

"Gaaaarggh!!!"

"B-Brook?! What's the matter, son?!"

Marquis Christon grabbed his son's shoulders, but he was already foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog.

"Gararggggh!"

Still on his knees, Brook looked up and convulsed. Black mist rose out of his body. Things weren't looking good.

The effect looked similar to the Possessed status, albeit far more amplified.

Fran, shove the curry down his throat!

"Hm!"

Fran took a plate of curry out of her Pocket Dimension.

"Jet, hold him down!"

Jet rolled the still spasming Brook over to his stomach and pinned him with his front paws. Fran took a spoonful of curry to his lips, but his rampage made it difficult to get anything into his mouth.

"Jet, roll him over again."

"Woof."

Turning him over, Fran forced Brook's mouth open and splashed curry all over his face. His symptoms were getting worse, and he showed no signs of being cured. Or maybe the curry just got into his eyes... Still, some of it must have gone in his mouth.

Did that work?

If only that were enough to cure him.

"GUAAARRRGH!"

Brook's body began to swell. His muscles grew at a visible rate. His skin turned dark, not the shade of sunburn, but pitch black as ink. His veins bulged and pulsed visibly under his skin like squirming worms. His face, however,

remained mostly unchanged, making him look all the more unsettling.

Gross!

“Hm.”

Fran reeled back at the sight of Brook’s metamorphosis. He no longer looked human. Were we too late administering the cure?

When I Identified him, his status screen looked like a monster’s. His name was gone, and in its place was the Type field which revealed his species. Corrupted Human. He was strong enough to kill the average goblin or soldier now, but still no match for us.

He had gained the Class Skill, Fiendmancy. I remembered seeing that kind of title on certain Goblins and Kobolds. It seemed exclusive to Fiend types. They had the Corrupted prefix in their names too, and their skin was the same inky black. Brook had even gained the title Slave of the Evil One, which looked eerily similar to Servant of the Evil One. There were too many similarities.

I thought that the Fiend Water only made its victims go into a frenzy? I didn’t expect it to turn them into actual Fiends.

What the hell is going on?

No matter how reckless Brook was, I couldn’t see him ingesting the dangerous Mana Water. At least, not by himself.

Was he being played by a third party? That left Zelyse the rogue alchemist and the old mage Linford...

I had no time to think about it now. We needed to deal with the Fiend in front of us.

In truth, I wanted to cut him down and get it over with, but doing that in front of his father might earn his ire.

Besides, there was still a chance that he could be cured. If we could get him talking, maybe we could get information from him. It was in our best interest to let him live, but...

As we mulled over what to do, the people outside the manor were beginning to transform, too.

“Gaaaaargh!”

“Roaaafrgh!”

We could hear the same screams come from the garden.

“Well then.”

This is bad.

A civilian like Brook transforming was bad enough, but what if it happened to trained fighters? They would be exponentially stronger as Fiends.

As the screams outside grew louder, I felt an incredibly strong presence rising. Then came the agonized cries of the city guard. The people outside had undergone the same transformation.

“Brook! Brook, talk to me!”

“Stay back!”

“Br—hurk!”

Marquis Christon ignored Fran’s warning and rushed to his son, still pinned under Jet’s feet. His concern was rewarded with a powerful kick.

“Count Rhodus! Are you all right?”

“S-somehow.”

The Count was still reeling from the pain and shock as the guard captain helped him to his feet.

“Aaaargh!”

Brook struggled fiercely under Jet's front paws. He had lost his mind and wasn't about to calm down. We fed him more curry and used Healing Magic, but all to no avail. When someone afflicted with Possession turned, the curse was lifted and the natural state of the creature took its place.

Fran, see if you can stop him moving.

"Hm. Jet, get off."

"Woof."

"Stun Bolt."

"Grr—gaahng!"

That worked. Brook rolled on the floor, freed from Jet's grasp. He was conscious but Paralyzed. Lightning Magic seemed really powerful, especially against the living.

Now, just sit on him, Jet.

"Woof."

Let's go, Fran.

"Hm."

We ran down the hallway and leapt out of a window into the garden.

They've all transformed!

The captured criminals of the Ythra Trade Association had become Fiends. They'd broken free of their bonds and were now on a frenzy—ten of them against thirty soldiers. The difference in power was too great. The city guard were overwhelmed.

"What do we do? Capture them all?"

Let's...just cut them down. Saving all of them is impossible with how much they're thrashing around. Even if we managed to cure them, they'd still get a death sentence.

They were guilty of conspiring to treason, after all.

Fran Air Hopped, kicked the air above her, and shot straight down like a bullet. I cast a wind spell, chopping off two heads on our way down.

Having been thugs in their former lives, these Fiends were stronger than Brook. From a Threat Level perspective, they were at least E-Threats.

However, their skills weren't anything special, and their equipment broke when they bulked up during transformation. They were no match for us, and it took a little under three minutes to take care of them.

Unfortunately, none of them had formed a crystal, despite being strong enough. No use complaining about it now, I supposed.

When the monsters were defeated, the city guards sat down, exhausted. However, the guard captain would have to postpone his rest. We had something to ask him.

"H-hey."

"Y-yes?"

The old captain had seen Fran's raw strength, and he was nervous. He had gained something of a fearful respect for her.

"Was this everyone in the mansion?"

"Yes, ma'am! The only ones left are the girls over there!"

He pointed towards the cowering slave girls. They hadn't seen the light of day in a while. I Identified them and found nothing physically wrong with them.

"Have you seen an alchemist called Zelyse or an old man called Linford?"

Were they among the Corrupted Humans we killed?
None of them seemed old enough to fit their description.

"No, ma'am."

I'd hoped the guards would apprehend at least one of them.

"We would know if they're in custody."

"You're familiar with them?"

"Zelyse is the alchemist who conducted human experiments on unwilling slaves. I won't soon forget him, - especially when we let him get away."

Danan would've known if the alchemist was among the Corrupted or if he had been caught in the manor, which meant that Zelyse took advantage of Brook and then abandoned him. He left the Corrupted time bombs behind, either as a diversion or as a means of killing us.

Maybe he was controlling them from afar. Whatever he was doing, it was bad news for us. Even Brook might have been an unwitting pawn in his plans.

What now...?

Should we trust Jet's nose, or should we look for more clues inside the house?

Teacher.

What's up?

Look at that.

Fran pointed to a gatekeeper. He was tied up, and the slave girls were keeping away from him.

He hadn't transformed, and yet he was still suffering from the Possessed ailment. Was there a difference between him and the others? It might have something to do with the amount of Fiend Water he consumed. The difference between a drop and a cup was huge. If that was the case,

the unwitting Possessed in town would have different transformation times, too.

That didn't mean we could sit on our hands.

Marquis Christon was still in a dumbfounded stupor from seeing his own son turn into a monster. We turned to the old guard captain, his second-in-command.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes. If what you say is true, and I'm sure it is, things might end up terribly for the city."

We didn't know how many civilians would undergo the Fiend transformation, but there had to be at least ten to twenty. If they morphed in a crowded area, the city might break into a full-scale riot.

"Call in the guards."

"I understand. I'll call in the Knight Guard as well. This is an emergency."

We told Danan how to tell if someone was Possessed.

"Identify, you say? So we are looking for the Possessed ailment."

"Hm."

"Understood. I'll send a call for everyone with the Identify skill. We'll post an emergency quest in the Adventurers' Guild, as well."

There had to be someone who could use Identify in a big city like Bulbola.

"The question now is how many people we should mobilize."

Danan was trying to decide how to end things quietly. If this whole thing came to light, the Count might have to step down. He needed to take Brook and Weint into custody quietly, without raising alarm, and find a way to cure the

Possessed before they went beyond the point of no return. Then we could apprehend Zelyse and Linford. In an ideal world, we'd end this matter without raising suspicion.

I thought it was downright impossible. We had no way of finding everyone in time to cure them, and the Possessed were guaranteed to cause unrest. The best we could do was to bring the masterminds into custody and try to keep the situation under control.

"May we ask for your continued assistance?" the guard captain asked.

"Of course," said Fran. "I'll go after that mage and alchemist."

"Thank you. It means a lot."

"I'm also going to check out the manor to see if there's any clues left behind."

"Of course," the guard captain agreed. "Who knows how many hidden chambers a mansion of this size would have."

"Hm."

Now we had the authority to legally investigate. It was Jet's time to shine.

Do you smell anything funny, Jet? Secret labs, hidden paths, anything?

"Woof!"

Jet started sniffing as he padded through the mansion. His clever snooping eventually led us down the stairs and into the basement. He stopped in front of a door.

"Bark, bark, bark!"

I didn't feel anyone inside.

Here?

“Woof!”

“I’m going in,” said Fran.

Be careful.

She opened the door to reveal an alchemical lab filled with a myriad of tools. We found nothing we could understand among the documents. This *had* to be Zelyse’s quarters, but the alchemist had scrubbed it clean of any clues.

I was disappointed, but the lab wasn’t Jet’s final destination. He sat in front of a wall next to a bookcase and began scratching it. Had he found a hidden path? I saw nothing of interest.

I knocked on it with Telekinesis. It sounded hollow.

Was there some kind of hidden mechanism to open it? The bookcase seemed suspicious. Or maybe there was a subtle indentation in the wall itself. The mystery got me excited.

“What is it, Teacher?”

There’s a hidden door here, but I don’t know how to open it. Could you—

“How about this?”

Bam!

Fran gave the wall a big kick. I was sure that the entire room was reinforced with magic, but she managed to shift the wall enough to reveal its seams.

Fran?

“One more time.”

Boom!

A roundhouse kick this time. Strong enough to shake the entire room. The wall collapsed, revealing a staircase

leading down into the darkness.

Of course. We don't really have to open it.

“Yeah? Let's go.”

“Arf?”

Fran and Jet tilted their heads, not understanding my disappointment.

It was all right. We were in a hurry. Lives were at stake. There was no time for me to play out my childish detective fantasies.

Jet took the lead as we went down the stairs. The path soon became a dirt tunnel. No traps so far. Whoever made this escape path saw no use for them.

Our trip would not be without interference, however.

“Someone's here...”

Yeah. He's not even hiding his murderous aura.

My Danger Sense tripped, even though the Corrupted humans had failed to trigger it. This was no mere thug.

Get ready for a fight.

“Hm.”

Jet, stay in the shadows for an ambush.

“Woof.”

We carried on carefully and soon reached a room around twenty meters wide. In the middle of it was the source of the aura. A lanky man with an annoyingly smug grin.

“I was wondering who found that escape tunnel. Didn't expect a little girl.”

“Are you one of Zelyse's cronies?”

"What? You think I follow that good-for-nothing drama queen?!"

He must be one of Linford's, then. He was strong; about the same level as the C-Rank we ran into earlier. His Spear Mastery and Spear Arts were at Level 8, and he had Stealth, Aura Sense, and Assassinate along with Dull Pain. He was a capable fighter and a spy.

His titles were what really caught my eye. Serial Killer and Sadist. He wasn't an upright citizen, that's for sure. And of course, we had Servant of the Evil One to worry about, too.

Brook had been a Slave of the Evil One. This guy, and the myriad Corrupted Goblins and Kobolds were Servants of the Evil One. What was the difference? With no further elaboration, Identifying didn't help. He was still human, though.

"You're not one of Zelyse's? So are you working for Theraclede?"

"What the hell are you talking about now? You must be dumber than you look if you think I'd work for that idiot meathead!"

Fran's innocent questions were hitting the mark. He knew Theraclede, but it didn't sound like they were friends.

"I am Luzelio! Servant of the great Fiendmancer, Linford! Unlike that hulking idiot Theraclede, I am Lord Linford's right-hand man!"

Fiendmancer. Never heard that one before. Maybe Linford was the one pulling the strings behind this incident, not Zelyse. So what was Linford's right-hand man doing in a place like this? The old wizard must've been content to put his confidant on stalling duty.

"You're going to die painfully, you little bitch. I'll strip you of more than your clothes and make you cry for mercy."

"You wish."

"Oooh, I like my girls feisty. They scream a lot louder!"

Awful words seemed to be part of his usual demeanor.

Well, let's beat him up and see what we can get out of him.

"Ha ha ha! You ready to go, you little brat?!"

"That's my line, you little bastard."

There was little Fran could do but return the favor.

With that final expression of hostility, the two of them clashed. Luzelio was set on killing us, while Fran was holding back for the sake of information. She needed to incapacitate, not kill.

"Tch!"

"Raah!"

Fran swung me, and I clashed with Luzelio's spear. She was the better swordsman, although the reach of his spear proved troublesome. It seemed the two were evenly matched, but Luzelio knew the score.

"Just die, you little bitch!"

"No."

"Crap, crap, crap! How is this brat matching me?!"

"Not even close."

"Aaargh!" Luzelio roared in frustration.

He had wanted to make Fran hurt, but reality wasn't obliging him. None of his hits landed, even though she was holding back.

Fran gained an inordinate amount of experience fighting people back in the Seedrun Conflict. She was much stronger now, although her skills and stats remained the same. Luzelio, meanwhile, relied on brute force. She wasn't going to lose to him.

I wanted to wrap up this fight soon so we could find out about Linford. Luzelio had Paralysis Resistance, though, so a Stun Bolt might not be enough.

Fran, incapacitate him with your next hit. Just remember not to kill him.

All right.

"Die!"

Luzelio twisted his body, adding torque to his spear thrust, but I put up a Wind Wall as a countermeasure. The lack of incantation surprised him and sent his spear flying out of control. His efforts to reel it back in made him stumble towards Fran.

"Wha—?!"

"Sloppy."

Fran took the chance and knocked the spear out of his hands. Jet rose out of Luzelio's shadow and bit his leg.

"Grrr!"

"Gaah!"

Jet tore into his right knee, ripping the lower part of his leg off. Luzelio lost his balance and fell on his rear. He looked at what remained of his leg in shock.

"My leg!!!"

He gnashed his teeth and glared at Fran and Jet with pure malice.

Fran pointed me at his face, and although he had pulled out a dagger, he hung his head, defeated.

“Tell me all you know about Linford.”

“What...?”

“Who is he?”

“Heh. The most powerful mage there is. He has infused his human body with the power of the Evil One and has promised the same power to us! We can finally shed this pathetic mortal coil and achieve the next step in evolution!”

The power of the Evil One... After witnessing Brook’s malevolent transformation, I had reservations about calling that progress. Did he actually want to lose his reason? I didn’t know what this pervert wanted.

“What’s Linford after?”

“Lord Linford is after ultimate power!”

“Not the resurrection of the Evil One?”

“Are you stupid? If that thing ever comes back, it’s the end of the world as we know it. How am I supposed to rape and murder to my heart’s desire, then?”

So Linford was only using the Evil One’s powers to further his own ends? But would the dark lord give such power to a nonbeliever?

“The Evil One’s the root of all villainy. He’s more than willing to offer his power to a crooked man like myself!”

I guess the evil god was as wicked as his name suggested. The bad people of the world were all legitimate candidates for his power.

“Where’s Linford?”

“At the new safehouse Brook provided.”

“Where’s that?”

“Right next to the Count’s estate. It’s the newest building there, you can’t miss it. It’s a conduit that will blast

the entire city of Bulbola with magic."

He sure was chatty about his master's plans. As I wondered about his stupidity, the ring on Luzelio's finger cracked and enveloped him with a dim light. He started fading quickly.

"Gya ha ha! Now who's the idiot?!"

Luzelio blinked a good ten meters away from his - original position. The ring must've been a consumable warp item.

He let loose an ear-grating cackle, took a small bottle out of his pocket, and drained its contents in one gulp.

"I thought I'd be nice and tell you our plans before you die!"

Black mist—the same which seeped out of Brook's body —began pouring out of Luzelio. The bottle must've contained Linford's cocktail of Fiend Water. Luzelio actually drank the stuff, knowing it would turn him into a monster. He really was serious.

The stump where his right leg had been bulged and throbbed as it started to regenerate.

"I'm going to tear you to piec—hurk!"

Not happening. Before I even had time to cast Short Jump, Fran closed in on Luzelio. He stood no chance of reacting in time. She learned this technique from the Flash Knight, Valuza. He wasted no movement projecting the initial direction of his attack, and Fran herself had found it difficult to react. She'd kept replaying the technique in her head until she eventually managed to reproduce it.

"Graargh!"

Fran grabbed Luzelio's face mid-sentence. She swept his leg from under him and knocked him down to the floor.

Luzelio's head hit the ground. Waiting for your enemy to finish his transformation was only an anime cliché.

"Drink it."

"Urrgph!"

Fran opened her Pocket Dimension, and a stream of curry poured into her fist. She forced it into Luzelio's mouth. He had no choice but to drink it.

"Hack! Gaah!"

The situation was grave, but I found the scene oddly comical.

"My eyes! I can't see!"

He'd managed to get curry into his eyes too, of course. He rubbed them with his arms. His screams died away, and he finally opened his eyes. I wouldn't have done that, considering the curry. He must've felt the rising energy inside him disappear. The leg Jet had torn off stopped regenerating mid-shin. Luzelio was furious.

"You... What did you to me?!"

"Healed you of your ailment."

"Y-you bitch! How dare you?! My powers...! I'll kill you!
I'll—"

"Hmph."

Fist still clenched, Fran delivered a splendid right hook to Luzelio's chin.

"Shut up."

Luzelio's screeching bothered her sensitive cat hearing. He stopped moving, possibly concussed. His unconscious eyes looked up at Fran.

That's one way of putting him down. What now?

He was a major accomplice and definitely held vital pieces of information. I wanted to capture him alive if possible. But should we bring him with us or leave him with the authorities? As I weighed my options, I sensed multiple auras coming from the estate.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

The guards were here. We handed Luzelio over, along with the information he had given us.

Let’s keep going.

We had the chatty deviant to thank for Linford’s last known location. We continued down the path and eventually found ourselves in the garden of another mansion. Must be one of Brook’s safehouses. No one was home, so I concluded that it wasn’t being used. I looked around. We were in the noble district.

Come on.

“Hm.”

“Arf?”

However, Jet wasn’t pointing to the direction of the Count’s estate.

What is it, Jet?

“Bark, bark, bark!”

He ran down a different path.

Is that where Zelyse is?

“Woof!”

Were Zelyse and Linford in different places? Had they already moved on from the building Luzelio mentioned? He hadn’t been lying, so maybe he’d been given false information. I didn’t see any reason why they would tell something so important to a pawn they were set on sacrificing.

Should we trust Luzelio or get Zelyse first...?

We ran through our options, starting with the information Luzelio gave us. Jet already knew the alchemist's scent, so we could rely on him later.

"Okay."

"Woof."

Fran jumped onto Jet and he Air Hopped to the roof of the mansion. Below, we could see the Knight Guard mobilizing. Danan had kept his word.

Suddenly, a scream rang out. A woman was being attacked in the middle of the street by a creature with inky black skin—a Corrupted Human. Fiend Water victims were already beginning to transform. We were in a hurry, but that didn't mean we could abandon her.

"Jet."

"Woof!"

Jet descended on the scene. Fran swung me at the Corrupted Human but failed to cut off its head.



“Grroaaaargh!”

It reacted to our presence and dodged, sacrificing its arm to save its neck. This Fiend was stronger than the ones we'd faced so far... it might have been an adventurer in its past life and had retained its Aura Sense and Sword Mastery. The stronger you were when you changed, the stronger you became.

The creature's face seemed oddly familiar.

“He's the adventurer who made a scene at our food cart.”

So that's where I know him from!

We were facing the adventurer Colbert had subdued. He should've been F-Rank, but now he was as strong as an E-Rank. We sliced him in half with our next attack, regardless. The meat-bag collapsed into a puddle of blood and fluids. Its blood was still red.

“Eek!”

The woman turned pale. Admittedly, the scene was too grotesque for the average person. She grew even more panicked when Fran and Jet tried to approach her.

We couldn't leave her alone. There might be other Corrupted Humans around. I thought of picking her up against her will and dropping her off somewhere safe, but...

Fortunately for the girl, a patrol squad walked by.

A scared girl, an armed beastgirl, and a giant direwolf. Under normal circumstances, we would've been taken in for questioning. But the guards recognized Fran.

We asked them to take the girl somewhere safe and asked about the situation in the city. Things were beginning to escalate, and they were worried that the conspirators might have poisoned the water supply. We needed to act fast.

I see it.

“That one?”

We surveyed the Count’s estate from the skies.

The manor was large and there were about ten smaller mansions surrounding it. However, we felt a distinct aura from one of them. It was the same malicious aura that the Corrupted Goblins and Kobolds emitted, but ten times stronger. Even from here I felt shivers run up my spine.

Fran and Jet hardened their gaze.

That must be the one.

As much as I wanted to charge through the front door, we didn’t know what our enemies were capable of. We had to be stealthy. Concealing our aura as much as we could, we descended on the garden. The building lacked any magical barrier and sneaking in was easier than I thought.

We’ll take out our enemies one by one.

“Hm.”

“Woof.”

We scoped out the perimeter and counted out enemies. It took ten minutes to get into the building. There weren’t that many people inside. Ten of them at best, I reckoned. They were all gathered at the center of the building, too. We had no choice but to go in.

Get ready for another fight.

“I know.”

“Arf.”

We entered through the back door and made our way to the concentration of people, holding our breath as we walked.

The mana in here was so thick it almost felt like a Haunt. It must've been the work of a magivice.

Our path to the center of the building was so unimpeded I felt disappointed.

Teacher, it's that door.

Yeah. They're all there.

We faced a large set of double doors. Behind it, everyone currently inside the mansion had gathered together. This close, there was no mistaking it. The mana signatures definitely belonged to Corrupted Humans.

What should we do, then? We didn't know how strong they were, and I wanted to avoid charging into a room full of berserk brutes that we had no chance of beating.

Theraclede and Luzelio were among Linford's minions, after all. Facing a Fiendified squad of C-Ranks and D-Threats would be dangerous by ourselves. We had to use the element of surprise and raze them all with our first barrage.

I didn't know whether Linford would survive that. Even the old mage would find it difficult to dodge and counterattack such a bombardment. I wanted to capture Linford alive, but was that even possible...?

What do we do?

"Arf?"

No, his capture wasn't worth Fran and Jet getting hurt. Their safety was my top priority. I wouldn't go so far as to say "and to hell with all the rest," but I wouldn't put Fran's life on the line for complete strangers. There was the slim possibility that the entire city might go up in flames if we didn't capture Linford alive, though.

Let's go in, spells blazing, I told her.

You sure?

Yeah. We don't know whether Linford's behind that door, but if we let him get away, the city falls into chaos.

We might as well kill Linford if it came to it.

Get ready.

Hm.

"Grr!"

Fran kicked the door down and started firing spells. I made sure that we were dealing with Corrupted Humans and nothing else. We could strike them down without hesitation. Although, if someone else was there, it would be too late to stop casting our spells.

Flare Explode! Gale Hazard! Flare Explode!

I let out a flurry of spells, all with Overboost—something I hadn't been able to do in a long time. Flare Explode was a Level 4 flame spell with an impressive area of effect. The flames spread much wider thanks to the wind spell I slipped in between.

"Fire Wall!"

"Grooaar!"

Stone Wall!

We were too close to our targets, and the heat poured off of the explosions. Layers of wall spells managed the radiating heat. The hall looked like a war zone—riddled with napalm blasts, dust and earthen walls containing the raging flames. Although we had three layers of wall spell between us and the carnage, the flames swirled as explosion followed explosion.

Was that too much?

"Better than not enough."

"Woof."

Once the fires settled, we surveyed our handiwork. Half of the second floor was destroyed, and the mansion now had a skylight in place of a ceiling. The first floor was in ruins, and the hall had lost its original shape. The explosion had blasted all four walls, making the hall look more like a garden.

“You haven’t even introduced yourself, and you’ve - already razed my hall, little girl.”

“Who are you?”

“Ho ho ho. Can’t you tell?”

“Linford the Fiendmancer.”

“Correct.”

Name: Linford Laurentia

Race: Fiend

Class: Fiendmancer

Level: 58/99

HP: 129; Magic: 850; Strength: 127; Agility: 120

Skills: Speedcast 4; Identify 7;

Fast Regeneration 6; Malice Sense 9; Abnormal Status Resistance 4; Incite 4; Venomology 7; Mana Manipulation

Class Skill: Fiendmancy; Evil One’s Blessing

Titles: Vanguard of the Evil One

Equipment: Corrupted Ogre’s Bone Staff; Corrupted Robes; Corrupted Mantle; Fiendmancer’s Bracelet

“What magic weapon did you use?” Linford asked. “I think it impossible that a creature such as you could be so

versed in spellcasting."

He came out of the rubble unscathed, though his minions were all badly broken. Ten Corrupted Humans fell near the tiny old man's feet, as if protecting him. The frontmost three had taken the brunt of it and were burnt to a crisp. The four corpses behind them were either medium or well done.

The remaining three Corrupted Humans, who were still a decent rare, were struggling to get back on their feet. Their companions had blocked the initial blast.

The white-haired Fiendmancer had no qualms about using his followers to death. I thought that Corrupted Humans were little more than hulking berserkers, but they might be able to hear Linford's commands. He was a Fiendmancer, after all. Maybe he had the ability to control lesser Fiends. However, my guess proved off the mark.

"L-Lord Linford, you must get away."

"We shall hold the line for you!"

The Corrupted Humans were...talking. In my panic, I Identified them and found they were different from the others. They retained their human names and bore the title Servant of the Evil One instead of Slave.

Did these Corrupted Humans retain their reason?

"They can talk?"

"I suppose you've met some of the other Corrupted in town. Indeed, these willingly accepted the power the Evil One offered!"

That explained the difference in titles. Slaves of the Evil One were unwilling or unwitting candidates, while Servants of the Evil One accepted willingly. That meant Luzelio would've retained his logic and reasoning even after

he drank the Fiend Water. That could've ended poorly. Good thing we didn't let him finish.

"What are the conditions for their transformation?"

"You think I'd tell you? Aah, but I will...as a reward for coming so far."

"Cut the crap."

"Ho ho ho. Such a strong-willed little girl. Becoming a Fiend is not difficult. One only needs to accumulate a certain amount of hate after drinking the Fiend Water. Then all it takes is a simple push."

That sounded a little too easy. If what Linford said was true, most of the townsfolk were in danger. Shouldn't the city already be overrun by Fiends? The old man couldn't be the only Fiendmancer in town. But judging by the Count and Danan's reactions, the phenomenon was not commonplace. It didn't make sense that two men of such high offices wouldn't know.

I doubted drinking water was enough to make you change, though it was hard to deny the Fiends that had morphed in front of me. What caught my attention was Linford's "simple push."

It must have something to do with why he chose this mansion as his conduit.

Luzelio mentioned that this place was going to be the epicenter of a mana blast that would destroy all of Bulbola. What would a mana wave do to a city?

Having sensed an oddity, I glanced behind Linford. It was hard to see at first, but there was a diagram on the floor. A magic circle.

I checked the flow of mana with my Mage skill. The malice tainting Linford's mana flowed through the circle, which allowed it to be broadcast throughout the city. This

was Linford's Simple Push. A ritual which would envelope all of Bulbola.

"It isn't every day that I meet someone who can - withstand the force of my mana. What do you think, girl? Will you join me? I can make you exponentially strong."

"What's your game...?"

Linford's motives were as Luzelio had said. He was not interested in the resurrection of the Evil One. He only wanted to amass power for himself.

At least he wasn't a mad cultist. He didn't say anything about ending the world and ruling together with the Evil One in the New Age, nor was he disappointed with the world or wish to see it end.

"So, will you become my follower? I can give you power. Power enough to evolve. Granted, mine is a little different from conventional evolution."

"Not happening."

"Are you sure? You are of the Black Cats, are you not? I hear you cannot evolve."

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard stories that your kind has been abandoned by the gods and left physically unable to change."

"..."

"But I can help you with that. You can evolve this very moment should you choose to follow me!"

Linford grinned and stretched out his withered hands. His offer of evolution sounded bogus. He would just turn her into one of his Fiends. However, Fran hesitated and didn't immediately reject his offer.

Fran, let's pretend like you're interested so we can gather more info.

We had Essence of Falsehood, so we didn't have to worry about him lying to us. Linford was suggesting that there was a secret behind the Black Cat's lack of evolution. It could be dangerous, but there might be something worth hearing.

No, I've heard enough. He's probably going to turn me into a Fiend anyway. Even if he weren't, it wouldn't be worth it.

I guess, but still.

Besides, I don't want to beg him, even as an act.

We didn't know if the rumor Linford mentioned about the Black Cats being abandoned by the gods was an actual fact. He might just be exploiting Fran's curiosity to kill her.

"Hm. I'll just have to get the truth out of him by force," Fran said, readying me. She gave the old wizard a look filled with determination.

"Ha! That's your answer, then? Very well. If you're - going to refuse my offer, then I'll capture you and turn you into a Fiend myself."

"You wish."

"Ho ho ho! You have quite a sharp tongue for one who is so weak. Do you have a trick up your sleeve? Don't think that an exploding magivice is enough to defeat me."

Linford had the Identify skill but thought Fran's stats were lower because of her Fake Identity. No wonder he was making light of her. The skill had worked its magic.

Teacher, I'm going for it.

Take him while his guard's down!

I set my eyes on Linford and prepared for a Telekinetic Catapult. He was only ten meters away, and I could reach him in no time.

Fran stood motionless as I launched myself from her hands. It was the perfect sneak attack. I flew straight at Linford's head, set to split it in half.

But something blocked my way.

"Hm! Your enchanted blade is quite strong. But you will not pierce through the Evil One's Blessing so easily!"

A mana barrier stopped me mid-flight and deflected me away from the old wizard. I couldn't believe that he'd successfully defended against my full strength. I had even supplemented myself with Overboost and Elemental Blade!

I landed far away from Fran.

Teacher, Jet, stay where you are.

If you say so. I'll look for an opening.

Hm.

"Arf."

"You came close. With that much power, you actually have a chance of interrupting my ritual. Not that my death would be enough to stop it. At best, it would buy you an extra ten minutes."

"Ritual?"

"Ho ho ho! There is no use in telling you what it's for. The ritual is already complete!" Linford bellowed.

The vague magic circle behind him glowed with an intensity too blinding to behold and then released a vast amount of mana into its surroundings.

"The other victims will turn into Fiends and create more slaves for the Evil One! Alas, we only succeeded in infecting three hundred and thirty. We were supposed to have thirty times that. No matter. Zelyse has plans for adding to our number."

It was the magic circle all along! Victims of the Fiend Water were beginning to transform throughout Bulbola.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

“Wait!”

Fran slipped her hand into the Pocket Dimension and threw Death Gaze at Linford, but the barrier protected him.

“Ho ho ho. You’ll need to throw a lot harder than that. Your sword really is the source of your power, then. Very well. You lot, capture the girl. Kill her if you have to.”

“Understood,” said the surviving Corrupted Humans.

They had regenerated at some point.

“Come quietly and offer your body to Lord Linford. Plead for your life quickly while he remains merciful,” the creatures scoffed.

Our Fake Identity showed Fran to be a mere D-Rank adventurer, after all. The Corrupted Humans grew haughty now that they thought she was beneath them.

“Plead? You should be pleading for your lives instead.”

“Ho ho ho! It pleases me to see such spirit in a girl your age, although too much spirit is bad for the soul. Enough foolishness. Kill her.”

Linford disappeared. Damn it. Did he teleport away? Was that within the scope of Fiendmancy?

“Brace yourself, little girl!”

“You’ll regret talking back to Lord Linford!”

The Corrupted Humans charged towards us. They looked shocked when they saw that Fran had disappeared, too. Not that she used any spell to do it. She just moved too fast for them to follow.

Fran quickly disposed of the Corrupted, not even giving them a chance to defend themselves. Fran had greater stats and a wider array of skills than all of them combined. This was what happened when you underestimated your opponent.

Fran, let's destroy the magic circle for now.

“I’m on it.”

We barraged the circle with spells to destroy it and left the mansion. The city was restless despite the late hour. I heard screams of fear and roars of fury in the distance. The harbor was lit up, not only with lights, but with red fire. The three hundred Corrupted Humans had already gone berserk. We had no time to hunt down every last one. The Knight Guard would have to pull through.

We have to get going.

“Hm.”

“Woof, woof!”

We killed every Fiend we ran into along the way. The completion of the ritual made the transformed townsfolk lose their minds. Only Servants of the Evil One like Linford and his cronies kept their wits about them.

We couldn’t leave the Corrupted Humans to run rampant...but I knew Zelyse and Linford were still up to something, and that was top priority.

We’ll go after Linford and Zelyse while they’re still close. Jet, sniff them out.

“Woof!”

We cut down three Corrupted along the way. Ten minutes later, we arrived at our destination.

How are things on your end, Master Linford?

“Zelyse? Aah, you’re using the telepathic magivice.”

Indeed. I am on my way to the Alchemists’ Guild.

“I am heading to the temple as we agreed. Things are finally going according to plan. There was a bit of an obstacle, but I managed to activate the magic circle.”

Obstacle?

“Yes. The Count knows about our plans. I suppose even he could no longer turn a blind eye to his son’s foolishness. He sent the Black Cat beastgirl after us. It’s that adventurer, Fran. She was nothing special. I am sure that my minions have taken care of her by now.”

We’ve no further use for Brook in any case, so the Count shouldn’t prove a problem. I do think killing this Fran girl is a bit pointless now, though.

“All that’s left is for Theraclede to capture that girl... Charlotte, that’s her name. Then our preparations will be complete.”

The Fiendstones have already been delivered to the temple.

“I see.”

To think that Fiendmancy can actually make contact with the temple sanctuary, even if only for a limited time. I still find it most curious.

“A simple procedure. All I need is an open conduit. It so happens that the Moons Festival provides the biggest opening for that conduit.”

Such a shame that it also allowed for the purification ceremony.

“All we need to do is reverse the ceremony. Charlotte is highly suited to become a priestess—she will make the perfect sacrifice. We can reap over a thousand souls by using her blood.”

How ironic that we need a holy priestess for the return of the Evil One.

“A last resort. If not for that strange bread, we would have corrupted at least a thousand souls.”

The Fiends will all be sacrificed to my crystal troops in the end. Just a little more time.

“Indeed. Then I will make a magic circle out of this city. A fitting altar for the Evil One.”

All bloodshed in this city will be an offering to him.

“Yes. That is why we put up with Brook’s nonsense coup.”

Let us take care, lest we stumble in our final steps.

“I know. I await good news.”

Chapter 6: The Greedy Alchemist

Jet led us to a giant building.

The Adventurers' Guild looked small in comparison, and its facade had the dignified look of a fortress. It could easily hold a thousand people. This was the Alchemists' Guild.

"There are a lot of adventurers here," Fran said as she surveyed the free-for-all in front of the guild hall.

I recognized the adventurers from their gear...but who were they fighting? They looked like Fiends, although the lack of life in their eyes made me think they were Undead. And yet, I could sense their hearts beating.

I Identified them as we approached. The adventurers were fighting creatures called Hellions. I'd never seen them before, and Fran was just as clueless. They were under the status ailment Damaged. I knew Poison, Paralyze, and Possessed, but what was Damaged?

Let's get an adventurer to tell us what's going on.

"Hm."

"Woof!"

I noticed a familiar face as we got closer. Eugene the Alchemist was with the adventurers, shooting spells at the shambling Hellions.

"Eugene?"

"Fran!"

"What happened here?"

"Before that, I must apologize."

Eugene rushed to our side, looking sullen. His laboratory was raided not an hour ago. The attackers had turned into Fiends that went berserk in the guild and charged into his lab. They stole only one thing.

“They took the Soul Essence you gave me...”

Did the YTA want their Soul Essence back...? No, Zelyse had his eyes on the Soul Essence from the beginning. It was probably his doing.

“I recognized an alchemist among the Fiends rampaging through the guild hall.”

Eugene had gathered a team of adventurers for his - excursion to the Alchemists’ Guild. When they got here, a swarm of shambling Hellions came to greet them.

“We managed to rescue some of the alchemists. When I asked them what happened, they said that it was an illegal alchemical experiment gone awry, courtesy of the high masters. They’ve also been sheltering my foolish pupil.”

The High Alchemists intended to use Zelyse to further their own ends. Instead, he poisoned them and took control of the entire guild. To make matters worse, he had run out of slaves to experiment on and had taken to using the apprentice alchemists instead.

His illegal research was called Human Hellion Studies—the same twisted experiments that Eugene had taken the fall for. Zelyse was grafting crystals into people to see if they could gain their power. Although he was supposed to have been exiled and had his research destroyed, some of the high alchemists thought it a shame to waste such promising research. They sheltered Zelyse and carried on his experiments. The research would prove valuable if they succeeded—they could’ve sold it to the country or the army for a dear price.

“So these used to be alchemists?”

"Yes... I asked the adventurers to see if removing the crystal would save them..."

Eugene had tried everything from Cleansing Magic, Healing Magic, surgery, and good old-fashioned Skill barrages to remove the crystal. None of it worked. Destroying, or even removing, a crystal would kill the person it was attached to. They were no different from monsters.

"They can't talk?"

"They've lost their minds. All they can do now is rage."

Theraclede had retained his speech. Were Fiends capable of receiving a crystal implant?

"Half of them were already crawling out of the guild hall... All we can do is surround the guild to contain the rest."

Subduing the rampaging Hellions proved difficult. As weak as they were, the former alchemists had retained their ability to use magic. Telling the adventurers to "incapacitate" these creatures was no better than a death sentence. Removing the crystal implant was only worth trying if they happened to accidentally knock a Hellion out.

"So we have to kill them?"

"Yes."

We had no choice. It was unfortunate, but we were running out of time. We had to work fast.

Teacher, go for the crystal.

You're right.

Fran brandished me and charged through the horde of hellions. I felt the familiar sensation of crystal absorption. However, I didn't gain the creature's skills. The stone had been artificially attached, so that could be the reason. To

make things worse, I only gained one point of crystal for my trouble.

Let's get this over with.

“Hm.”

Fran charged through the horde again, but every hellion I cut down only yielded a single crystal. Unfortunate. Suddenly, a new creature with a slightly different look appeared.

“It’s strong.”

Its stats are up there, too. And it’s not in a Damaged state.

This thing was much faster and stronger than the others. It also had a single point in Sword Mastery. Fran took it down in an instant, but it was still tougher than all the rest. I got three crystal pieces out of it. Was that what Damaged was supposed to indicate? Perhaps Damaged meant that the creature was weak and didn’t yield much crystal. It could also refer to the state of the crystal itself.

That took care of most of the hellions outside. I was about to barge through the Alchemists’ Guild door, but I didn’t detect any signs of life coming from inside. If there was anything alive in there, they weren’t that strong. So why was I getting a bad feeling about it...?

Jet felt it, too.

“Grrr...”

He crouched in front of the guild doors and growled.

What is it, Jet?

“Bark, bark!”

“Something’s coming.”

I can’t feel a thing...

I deferred to Fran and Jet's judgment, despite not detecting anything. Their senses were much sharper than mine.

"We'll be ready when it comes out."

Right!

We waited for a minute before I finally felt the encroaching presence. Its aura was faint, and its mana output felt weak. Strangely, I knew that the creature was strong. My Danger Sense triggered with each step it took. What interested me most was how unnatural the creature was. It did not feel like a living thing but like a crawling mass of mana. My questions were answered when the creature showed itself.

Is that a Golem? Looks like it has Identity Protection, too.

Even with Heavensight, I only managed to scan the creature's name: Crystal Golem.

"Grr."

Here it comes! Get ready!

"Hm!"

The Crystal Golem looked intimidating as it ran down the steps of the Alchemists' Guild. Its hulking body was formed from crimson crystal, and it looked like an armored gorilla with its long arms and short legs.

We felt no life flow through it. It really was a Golem.

As we watched its movements, the Golem raised its right arm. Without warning, it blasted a beam of red light. It had Flame Magic. Flare Blast, to be exact. The ray of fire blazed across the battleground.

There was no time to prepare! As we puzzled over its existence, the creature seized its chance and blasted us with

magic. With that much power, the Crystal Golem might raze the neighborhood.

Damn it!

“Hang in there!”

We frantically cast Healing Magic all around us. We were just in time, and no one lost their life. Thankfully, no one had taken a direct hit.

“Raaagh!”

“Take that thing down!”

The adventurers charged towards the Crystal Golem and started hacking away at it. However, their attacks barely fazed it, despite its lack of magical barriers or defensive spells.

“What is this thing made of?!”

“It’s worse than cutting rocks!”

The Crystal Golem was rock hard. The swords of low-rank adventurers barely grazed the creature’s crystalline skin. All they did was make it easier for the thing to blast them with another beam of flame. Several people caught fire and rolled on the ground desperately. We managed to heal them, but if we didn’t take this thing down soon, there would be casualties.

“Hey, there. How do you like my Crystal Golem?”

“Hm?”

What is that? A hologram? Is he using Illusion Magic?

A man appeared between us and the golem just as we were closing in on it. I thought he’d warped here, but it was a mirage. The figure was see-through, and bits of mana static interrupted his broadcast.

The man was irritatingly handsome. He was in his mid-twenties, by my count. His blonde hair and blue eyes gave

him a princely appearance, despite his short stature.

“Who are you?”

“Zelyse!” Eugene’s shocked cry revealed the newcomer’s identity.

“It’s been a long time, Master.”

So this was Zelyse? He was younger than I thought and didn’t look anything like I imagined. I thought he would be a seedy-looking researcher type in his mid-forties.

“You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Being a Magus has its perks.”

So his youth was a product of his race.

“What happened to the alchemists? Was that your doing?”

“Yes. All failed experiments of crystal grafting. It - appears that even if you manage to graft a crystal onto a human, they need to be strong enough to take it, both physically and mentally. My weaker subjects died immediately. The luckier ones merely went brain dead. I’ve seen necromancers raise livelier zombies. Well, at least they’re easy to control.”

Zelyse boasted about his crimes as if they were medals. He was getting on my nerves. At least he was giving us free information.

“I must dedicate more time to hellion research. That Crystal Golem, though? That’s almost done. What do you think? This is just another one of my great achievements. I don’t mean to brag, of course. Where would I be without my collaborator?”

“Are you talking about Linford?”

“Correct. And you must be the adventurer, Fran. I’ve heard about you.”

“Who is this Linford?”

Right, Eugene didn’t know about the old wizard.

“Fiendmancer. One of the people behind this monster transformation mess.”

“Hey, I helped, too. He taught me how to use Malice and Fiendmancy. I taught him alchemy and all there is to know about crystals.”

I knew he was in on it!

“So you are part of tonight’s unrest?”

“That’s right, Master. In fact, I dare say I planned most of it. We needed a lot of souls, you know. Two to three thousand, at least.”

Zelyse smiled innocently. He didn’t have a shred of conscience left in him. Eugene turned pale.

“Wh-why...”

“Let’s see. I guess I wanted proof that I was alive.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Fran tilted her head. I didn’t understand what he was talking about either.

“Let me simplify it for you. I want to leave a mark on history. I want to be so renowned that they’ll talk about me a thousand years from now.”

“And you plan on sacrificing the lives of thousands just for that?! Zelyse, what are you thinking...?!” Eugene glared at him. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Where did you go wrong...?”

“Nowhere. I was polite, yes, but this is how I’ve always been. I am thankful to you, Master. Thanks to you, my dreams will come true.”

Eugene was a good person at heart. He couldn’t understand Zelyse’s malice—though malice was too kind of a word

for Zelyse. He saw the rest of the world as mere material to further his means.

Even now, I think Eugene believed there might be a chance for him to turn over a new leaf. But as far as I was concerned, Zelyse was past redemption. We were dealing with no mere rotten apple, but a mutant who actively infected and poisoned other apples. Apples like him needed to be disposed of, lest someone eat it and die.

Unfortunately, he was good at hiding himself. It was hard to detect him until it was too late.

“Besides, is it so strange to want to be famous? To leave behind a legacy? Everyone must have that desire.”

“There is a limit to it! Are you satisfied with notoriety for committing a great massacre?”

“Actually, yes.”

His response was so immediate and guileless that it made me sick.

“I don’t mind being notorious. In fact, being notorious might be better.”

His wicked eyes and conviction-filled gaze made him look like a fanatic up on his soapbox.

“Why?”

“Fran,” said Zelyse. “Are you familiar with the Fortress King Yuvel or the Wolf Killer Elmera? Even the Dragon Killer Siegmund would do, really.”

“Never heard of them.”

“Really? And our civilization owes them so much. They’re all quite important, you see. The hero king who stopped a million goblins with his noble knights, the great Godsmith who fought the Direwolf Fenrir to a draw. The adventurer who died after killing the dragon king

threatening the land of Chrome. Don't you think they're all fantastic?"

"Sure, I guess."

These were the legendary heroes of this world, and Zelyse talked about their ballads. I was interested, especially in Elmera the Godsmith. Fenrir was an S-Threat monster and the namesake of the Demon Wolf's Garden. Did he face it with a Godsword? I would've asked Zelyse, if I didn't want to smash his face in.

"Yet, you know nothing of them. Not that you're the only one. All right, what about Trismegistus the Traitor?"

"I know him."

"Of course you do. Who doesn't? And that is my point."

Trismegistus? Who's that?

Fran, who's this Trismegistus guy?

Notorious alchemist. Plunged the continent of Goldicia into ruin. Bad guy, she explained succinctly.

Once upon a time, there was an alchemist called Trismegistus. He was also a king of the continent of Goldicia. As an alchemist, he experimented on monsters to achieve his ambition of world conquest. He broke the seal of the Evil One's heart and used its power. However, his experiment failed when the monster broke loose. The beast rampaged all over the continent, destroying Goldicia and taking many lives. It consumed everything in its path, growing bigger and bigger until it eventually covered the entire continent. It was only a matter of time before it consumed the whole world.

As men everywhere despaired, the gods extended a helping hand and cast a barrier over Goldicia, sealing the abomination away. The Abyss Eater lives on to this day. The gods cursed Trismegistus with immortality, and the

alchemist king was still being digested within the Abyss Eater, even now.

Where truth ended and myth began, no one could know. But it did make a good bedtime story to scare children into behaving. Anger the gods, and they'll curse you like Trismegistus. The story had a lot more impact in a world where gods were provably real.

"Oh, Trismegistus! He's my favorite. He left his mark on history."

"Such foolishness! Do you...really intend to break a seal of the Evil One?"

"Of course! But not to worry. I'm not going for something as important as the heart. Only a small lump of flesh."

"And you think you can control it?!"

"Well, yes. Remember, it's me we're talking about. Just sit back and watch as I carve my name in history. I'll be seeing you!"

"Wait!"

Zelyse's body faded into thin air. Fran swung at him, but he was only an illusion.

He got away.

"I'm going after him!"

Fran looked pissed. The conversation had made her hate Zelyse even more.

Hold on! We have to deal with this Crystal Golem first.

"Right..."

I was all for chasing down that psycho, but that didn't mean we could leave. We didn't know where he was, and even Jet would be hard-pressed to track him.

Come on!

We attacked the golem to see how tough it was. Then, we would be able to start chipping awa—huh?

“What?”

The Crystal Golem disappeared. I felt the familiar sensation of absorbed crystal. These things were made of it. That meant I could absorb them. Well, this suddenly got a whole lot easier. I was the natural predator of these golems.

“What the hell was that, little lady?!”

“She disintegrated it with one hit?”

Oh, this was bad. I had publicly displayed my crystal absorption. What should we say?

“Come now, you know it’s bad manners to ask others about their Skills.”

“W-well, sure, but...”

“I guess you’re right...”

Eugene covered for us. Thank God he was around.

“Wow, you really are good!”

A voice came from behind us without warning. We turned around to once again see the psychotic pretty boy, Zelyse. Another illusion. We cut him just in case, but my blade went straight through. He had faked running away to get closer.

“Really, though. What are you? You keep getting in the way of my plans, and here you are destroying Crystal Golems with one swing. Honestly, I feel quite annoyed.”

“Just a Black Cat, D-Rank Adventurer.”

“Aha ha ha. You’re not good at making jokes, at least. You see, when you destroy a Crystal Golem, it should

explode and release the Malice in its core. You expect me to believe that an ordinary D-Rank can destroy both the Golem and the Malice bomb?"

"You saw me do it."

"I originally planned to use the golems as a distraction, so I could wait to test my latest exploding magivice. So much for that idea. Well, I guess you did show me something interesting, so I'm willing to write it off. Besides, I have this now."

Zelyse's mirage took out the stolen Soul Essence. It had returned to its rightful owner.

"What is that Soul Essence?" Eugene asked, breaking his silence.

He couldn't ignore the mystery.

"You couldn't figure it out, Master? He he he, you better be sitting down for this. This is the Soul Essence of a Chimera!"

"A what?! No...that's impossible..."

"That rare?"

"Rare is an understatement! Chimera production is banned. It's too dangerous. There are only five in the entire world!"

"Aha ha! What do you think? Aren't I great? The nice people at the Raydoss Alchemical Labs gave it to me for a billion gold. All I had to do was claim the Bulbolan Alchemists' Guild needed it. I didn't even have to use my own money. I mean, Fran did steal it en route to Bulbola, but all's well that ends well."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Create the strongest of monsters, of course! One so strong it can destroy the world! With the Evil One's Lump of

Flesh, it should become even stronger than the Abyss Eater."

That sounded beyond dangerous. To think we'd been walking around with that bottle of mass destruction.

"You've destroyed my Crystal Golem, so I guess this is farewell. Goodbye!"

"Zelyse..." Eugene shouted after his crazed pupil, but he was already gone.

"What's a Chimera?"

"The Chimera is the most dangerous kind of artificial monster."

The Chimera Soul Essence was created in an effort to synthesize a hybrid of different monsters. What they created instead was a beast far more powerful than any mage, wizard, or researcher could've anticipated. A monster beyond any A-Threat. To make matters worse, no one could control it. It went on a rampage through the countryside, destroying several cities in the process.

Research continued, but the Chimera refused to be subjugated. When it eventually destroyed an entire kingdom, the nations of the world agreed to ban the manufacture of its Soul Essence. Research was destroyed, and the researchers were disposed of.

Creating the Soul Essence of a Chimera required extremely rare materials, some of which came from extinct species. Not that they were impossible to get a hold of...

"Raydoss is in a state of chaos," said Eugene. "Zelyse might have received the Soul Essence from someone who didn't know how dangerous it was."

"Raydoss is a mess right now?"

We couldn't ignore the latest news about our least-favorite kingdom.

“The ruling monarch died ten years ago, and there’s been a power vacuum ever since. The four great houses are still fighting for control. The situation has only gotten worse, and half the Country is a pitiful mess. Oddly enough, there has been news of a great war between the houses.”

That shed some light on things. Was Salut working for one of the houses when he spied on Fult and Satya? The Lich might have been involved, too. Maybe it was all a ploy to lower our defenses. I wanted to dig further, but that was all Eugene knew.

“I shall inform the Count and the Adventurers’ Guild about Zelyse. They must know that he is in possession of a Chimera’s Soul Essence.”

Then it was time to go after him!

Jet, track down the scum closest to us!

If Zelyse was still nearby, we’d beat him up and retrieve the Soul Essence. If Linford was closer, we’d go and kick his ass. He was the Fiendmancer in charge, so Zelyse would need him to summon the Evil One. If we couldn’t find Zelyse, then we might as well ruin his plans!

“Let’s go, Jet!”

“Woof!”

Ten minutes later.

This the place?

“Woof!”

Zelyse or Linford?

“Arf.”

Jet had tracked down Linford.

Are you sure this is the place?

"Woof."

We were standing in the temple square. The same place where Charlotte had danced for the Moons Festival ceremony. Jet pointed his muzzle towards the majestic stone temple.

Faint magical energy seeped out of the building. I couldn't sense anyone in the vicinity, but I trusted Jet's nose. Still dumbstruck, I asked him again, just to make sure.

I mean, this is a temple.

This world's religion was not divided into different sects. All ten of the major gods were worshipped at temples all over the land. Some held patronage over certain Classes and Races, but even adherents revered all the gods.

There were no cultists or preachers, either. Even the temples held no political power. Using the names of the gods to further your own gain was forbidden, punishable by death. The citizens of this world believed that they would be struck down by the gods for such an act, even though it was only rumor and legend. Back on Earth, this law would have wiped out a good ninety percent of the clergy.

The temple employed priests and priestesses, but only because they had the Oracle Skill. In truth, they were more like administrators. They worked at the temple and arranged the pomp and ceremonies of the city festivals.

Classes were considered the domain where the gods bestowed their graces, and praying to them allowed you to change your Class. This was the most important feature of the temples. One had to donate three thousand gold, but the gods only required it for temple maintenance and to cover the cost of living for their priests and priestesses.

You could change your Class at the Adventurers' Guild only because they had a magivice which served the same purpose. I thought this would offend the gods, but when we

brought it up with a guild administrator, we were met with the irresponsible yet reasonable answer. Since the guild was still in business, the gods obviously didn't mind.

Still, the facts of the temple remained. A place where impurities were washed away and people received the full blessing of the gods.

So what was Linford doing in such a holy place?

What is going on?

“We'll find out soon enough.”

“Woof!”

You're right.

We concealed our presence and approached the temple.

The windows were, in fact, small skylights. Fran was the only one who could fit through. We peeked inside but saw no one. The magical energy, while faint, was undeniable.

I definitely feel malice... But at a temple?

We had never visited the temple, but we'd passed by it countless times. The energy I felt then was clean and pure. It was never this dark and heavy.

We would have to venture inside...

Let's go...

Making up our minds, we used Silence to maintain our stealth and opened the door.

There's someone here, Fran observed.

We peered through the crack and saw a figure deep inside. It was too dark to make out, but it was small and human.

That's Linford.

“Woof, woof!”

He hadn't noticed us. This was our chance, but I didn't want to risk damaging the temple. I wondered if the gods would let me off since I was defending their sanctuary from evil. Still, we couldn't afford to sit here and do nothing. Who knew what Linford might pull?

Those crystals are definitely up to something, I told Fran.

Yeah. Must be a vital part of his plan.

Three giant crystals surrounded Linford. Malice emanated from the black Fiendstones, and they glowed a bluish-purple. They must be the cause of the twisted energy.

I'll take Linford, I said. *You two focus on destroying those Fiendstones.*

Got it.

"Woof!"

Fran let go of me and readied her Death Gaze.

Teacher.

Yeah?

No holding back. We kill him now.

Are you sure? We might lose our only chance to learn about your evolution.

Fran was certain. *I am. You promised you'd help me evolve. I don't need that old wizard's help.*

I said that on the day we first met. I was amazed Fran remembered.

She trusted me with all her heart... I-I wasn't crying, all right! I was just really fired up!

Don't you worry, Fran...I'll help you evolve!

Hm.

"Woof, woof!"

Jet barked excitedly to gain our attention.

Jet says he'll help, too, I told her.

Thanks.

"Arf!"

Let's do this! Short Jump!

I transported myself right above Linford's head and then plunged down with Telekinetic Catapult.

"What is this?!"

Damn it, it's so hard!

His barrier activated as soon as it sensed danger, deflecting my perfect ambush. Linford wouldn't have - panicked if his Aura Sense warned him of my presence. I'd attacked from his blind spot, and he only noticed because I was trying to break through his barrier.

"Beastgirl! What are you doing here?!" Linford shouted angrily.

She ignored him and rushed the Fiendstone.

"What is this sword?! I can't move!"

Oh, I see, now. He couldn't move as long as he was under the barrier's protection. I increased my telekinetic output. He couldn't go after Fran with me drilling through his barrier. His mana was depleting, too.

"Corruption Smash!" Linford shot a spell at Fran.

He can use spells from inside the barrier?!

That was incredibly useful. Linford's barrier automatically activated to stop my Telekinetic Catapult, and yet he was able to fire spells from inside. Its only weakness was that he couldn't move while it was on.

Around thirty Malice bullets sped towards Fran and Jet. However, they were too agile. They dodged and continued

their assault.

“Stop that!” Linford screamed as an explosion engulfed the Fiendstone.

Although it withstood an onslaught of flame magic, cracks began to form on its surface. It would break eventually.

“I said, stop it! Gah! I have to do something about this blasted sword!”

Of course you do. I had no intention of letting him go.
Burst Flame.

Linford tried to reposition himself, and I blocked his way with a fire spell. The spell was weak, but it enveloped its target in fire for a good minute or so.

Burst Flame.

Burst Flame.

I flew about, surrounding Linford in fire as his barrier continued to protect him. The curtains of flame blocked his sight, and he didn’t know where I would attack from. Linford was firing blind now, letting Fran and Jet focus on the Fiendstone.

“Haa!”

“Grrr!”

Spell and sword, fang and claws. Their relentless attack on the Fiendstone continued until it finally broke. The Malice which infected the temple disappeared in an instant! The crystals were its source all along.

“How...dare you!”

“Nailed it.”

“Awoo!”

Linford realized what had happened, even behind the wall of flames. I grinned at the frustration in his voice. Our plan had worked.

"The conduit will close if the Fiendstones are - destroyed! I must take this into my own hands...!"

Linford's barrier disappeared. He was desperate now. He turned off his protection and chose to risk the flames around him. He might take damage, but at least he would be able to protect the remaining Fiendstones.

Linford rushed towards Fran, his robes smoldering.

"I won't let you meddle with my plans, Beastgirl!"

I anticipated this outburst. He was bound to get desperate enough to sacrifice his own life.

Eat this!

I Short Jumped on top of Linford's head and drove down with all the telekinetic energy I could muster.

"Gaaaaah!"

I pierced his torso. The old wizard gargled a blood--curdling scream.

I cut Linford in half, clean through his waist. The cut was so clean that he looked like a bust in a museum.

I activated Telekinetic Catapult as soon as I'd done enough. I threw an extra wind spell in there, just in case. My telekinetic brakes stopped me just short of the temple floor and left it almost pristine. The only scratch came from the tip of my blade.

It was a silly move, considering I had engulfed the inner sanctum with fire. I was careful to control its spread, though. The stone floors were only slightly burned. I prayed that the gods would forgive me. I was trying to stop this Servant of the Evil One!

I turned fearfully towards one of the stone images. No reaction. I was probably all right. Linford went out of his way to desecrate this sacred ground and wasn't struck by lightning on his way here, so surely I was in the clear. I really was sorry though, and I made a note to clean up the mess the first chance I got.

"You bastards! You won't get away with this!"

As I apologized to the gods of this world, Linford's screams echoed about the temple. He sure was loud for a torso. How was he still moving?!

"I will break that sword upon the altar and serve it to the Evil One!"

He was already regenerating. There really was no - humanity left in him. We fired spells to kill him off for good, but his barrier activated again.

"Theraclede! I summon you!"

Knowing he was outmatched, Linford resorted to summoning his minions. A magic circle appeared inside the barrier, stopping us from using our saturation attack.

To make matters worse, he was summoning Theraclede. We'd never encountered the Mad Warrior, but we knew he was bad news. He was as strong as a B-Rank and could maim Colbert with an ambush. How strong was he in his Corrupted form...?

We should retreat. It was too dangerous for us to fight him.

Or so I thought...

"What? Why is this happening! Theraclede, I summon you!"

The magic circle reappeared, but again nothing came out.

“Theraclede! You dare refuse my call! Traitor!”

It looked like Linford had been backstabbed by his own kind.

“You wretch! What of the girl?! Damn it, how dare he ignore my call!”

Now's our chance.

“This ends here.”

“Grrr!”

While Linford was distracted with his rebellious minion, I launched into my third catapult attack.

I clanged against his barrier but had already taken it into account. Now came our real attack.

“Burst Flame.”

Burst Flame.

“Awooo!”

The general strategy was the same: deplete his mana and pin him in place by chipping away at his barrier. Once he ran out of mana, the barrier would vanish.

“Urrgh! Again with this foolishness!”

Linford looked distraught. Were we close to breaking through?

“Damn it...! I do not have enough conduits...but no matter! Oh, Lord of Evil! Grant your servant strength!”

The wizard refused to die. Enraged, he uttered an incantation. It seemed to concentrate the Malice in the temple on him.

What the hell is this...?

It was as if the temple was bestowing power on Linford... Was this the Fiendstone's doing?

My Danger Sense was going crazy, chiming even louder than the time we ran into the Midgardsormr.

“Nuaaaarrggghhh!”

Jet-black mana erupted from the wizard’s body with an ear-splitting scream, crashing into us with the force of a tsunami. I broke through his barrier, only to be blasted away.

Fran, Jet, get out of here!

We had to get away!

Jet retreated to the shadows while Fran took me so we could blink out of the temple. We could see the concentration of Malice even from the outside. Pitch-black light shone through the temple skylights, swaying the great structure.

A great beam of Malice blew the roof off and shot towards the heavens. The temple shook as something exploded inside of it. A rain of pebbles and a great cloud of dust settled on the square. The temple was reduced to rubble.

An abomination stood at the center of it all.

“GRAAAAARK!”

The creature’s howl pierced the night.

The vibration shook the air and resonated my blade.

“That thing’s huge,” Fran said, looking at the thing that used to be Linford.

But that was Linford all right. Blessed by the powers of the Evil One, he was gigantic now, but he was definitely still Linford.

The monster stood in the rubble, staring at us with hateful eyes.

It's huge!

"Woof."

The Fiend was over fifteen meters tall. It was vaguely humanoid, with bulging muscles and inky black skin. Similar to Corrupted Humans but much too big.

Still, the creature's face was Linford's without a doubt.

"You won't get away this time, Beastgirl!" the giant roared.

Name: Linford Laurentia

Race: Vilefiend

Class: Fiendmancer

Status: Vile

Level: 99/99

HP: 5620; Magic: 4458; Strength: 2027; Agility: 598

Skills: Speedcast 7; Identify 7; Fast Regeneration 9; Malice Sense 9; Abnormal Status Resistance 6; Incite 6; Venomology 7; Mana Manipulation

Class Skill: Fiendmancy 10; Vilemancy 5; Evil One's Blessing; Cage of the Evil One

Titles: Blessed of the Evil One

Holy crap!

Linford had become the strongest enemy we had faced so far. He was even stronger than the Demon in the dungeon. He was easily a B-Threat, if not an A-Threat—an excellent match for that Lich we fought so desperately in the Sky Dungeon. And he had a couple of skills I'd never seen before, to boot.

Fighting him alone was suicide.

We're getting out of here! Come on, Jet!

“Hm!”

“Woof!”

Fran and Jet sensed Linford’s terrifying power. They agreed without complaint. They turned around and ran as fast as their legs would allow. I started casting, and once we were a good fifty meters away, I finished my spell.

Short Jump!

Fran and I cast the same spell in unison. We would gain as much distance as we could through continuous blinking. Jet would figure something out with his Shadow Walk. However, our plan was cut short.

Gah!

“Ow!”

“Aarf!”

Our path was blocked by an invisible barrier. Jet rammed into the same substance, despite being in the shadows.

“None shall escape the Cage of the Evil One!”

So that's what that skill was for! I didn't think it would have such an effect. I looked around and noticed a clear dome, fifty meters in diameter, centered around Linford. This was the Cage of the Evil One.

Inferno Burst!

“Fire Javelin!”

Come on!

With all my spells lined up, now was the time for Telekinetic Catapult!

That didn't work, either?!

But the dome wasn't even scratched, and I took damage to my durability for the attempt. The dome was as strong as Linford's last barrier.

Dimension Jump!

I used a mid-distance teleportation spell this time. Controlling where I would appear was difficult, and I often wound up in the wrong place. Still, it was a stronger spell than Short Jump.

How about this?!

“Hurk!”

“Ugh!”

Damn it! Did the dome block all teleportation skills?

“Corruption Flare.”

Malice and mana swelled behind us. If I were human, I would've gotten goosebumps. I could sense the danger and feared what was coming. I frantically cast another spell.

Short Jump!

A pitch-black ball of fire descended on us, burning everything in its path. If we hadn't jumped, we would've been ash.

This is bad!

I put up a mana barrier at the last second, but it only soaked up some of the damage. Where we had been standing, there was now a gigantic crater. The flames were so hot that they turned the ash to glass. A direct hit would've burned us to cinders, while our mana barrier left us half-dead.

“You've done well to dodge that! How about this then... Corrupted Familiars!”

Wha—?!

"Let's see how well you can dodge this."

Countless malicious auras swelled all around him. I counted fifty at the very least. They were cannonballs of Malice, the size of volleyballs, which launched at Linford's command.

To make matters worse, each shot came at a different speed and along a different path. Some came straight at us, while others made homing loops.

"Urk!"

Fire Shield!

"Huff!"

Wind Gale!

We dodged, cut, and blocked the shots that came our way.

Fortunately, each individual shot wasn't too strong. But getting hit slowed our movements, opening us to the next volley.

What now? I had to find a way to get out of here. We could either find a way to bypass the dome or break through it. But Time Magic Teleportation and Shadow Walk couldn't pass through. Should I spend my EP in the hopes of unlocking a new skill? I had no guarantee that it would work.

Should I brute-force it, then? Throw all my Flame Magic and Sword Arts at it? Alternatively, I could level up Cleansing Magic in the hopes that it could purify Malice. But what if those were all false hopes?

If I wanted sheer force, that left me only one choice.

Teacher, let me use Unleash Potential.

No!

Unleash Potential. As mysterious as it was, I still - remembered the damage it did to the Lich. With it, we could

not only escape, but also defeat this monster. However, the skill was a double-edged sword. Even if we won, it would be a pyrrhic victory. I would not let Fran use it.

Ever.

Let me try something.

I decided our best bet was Space-Time Magic. I used six points of EP to max it out. I had twelve points left now.

Space-Time Magic is now at Level 10.

You have unlocked Unique Skill:

Dimension Magic 1

A Unique Skill? Maybe this will work!

Or so I thought. With Dimension Magic at Level 1, I only had Chronos Clock, Quick, and Slow at my disposal. They were of no use at the moment. I'd learned a new teleport spell for maxing out Space-Time Magic though. That allowed me to link long distances.

Long Jump!

The spell didn't grant us escape. Our movement was halted once again by the Cage of the Evil One. I knew now that it wasn't a matter of distance.

The Malice bullets caught us again, and we were surrounded.

Fran steeled herself. *We have to use Unleash Potential.*

Then I'll use it, I told her.

No, I'll use it.

Absolutely not. That skill takes from you more than you know. You might die.

But—

You are not using that skill!

Hmph.

As we carried out our argument...

“Guh!”

Fran!

Fran took a direct hit from a Malice orb. Damn it, we only lost focus for a second! The other orbs soon followed, crashing into her one after another.

“Gah!”

Fran was knocked to the ground, making her an easy target.

Crap!

I frantically put up a mana barrier and blinked a short distance away. Fran had taken respectable damage, and her mana was running low, but at least we escaped the Malice orbs. But that was exactly what Linford wanted.

“Corruption Flare.”

“Aaaah!”

Since our Short Jumps were too fast for Linford to keep up with, he anticipated where we would go. Great flames engulfed us, boiling away the blood Fran had shed.

I focused all my energy on the mana barrier. Fran did the same.

“Gaaaaah!”

Goddamn it!

The flames burned away two layers of barrier and engulfed us. It blew us away, and Fran’s body rag-dolled across the ground.

“Aaah...”

“Ho ho ho! I finally have you, yapping little Beastgirl!”

We’d managed to escape death, but Fran and I were broken and bloody.

Half of Fran’s left arm and leg were burned to ash and her body was covered in blisters.

Fran!

“Uhh...”

She was struggling to stay conscious. The next attack would finish her.

I healed Fran as much as I could with Greater Heal. But another Malice orb flew right at us and blasted us in different directions.

Fran!

She was far away from me now. I couldn’t see past the dust from the explosion, but I felt she was around fifty meters away. As I frantically tried to get back to her side, I noticed something.

Damn it! What did Linford summon this time?

I felt an inhuman presence coming from above. It had to be one of Linford’s familiars. As the mysterious being approached, I took the initiative and attacked. I usually would’ve surveyed the situation first, but current conditions left me impatient.

I flew into a telekinetic swing, but the creature dodged easily.

Now I came face-to-face with our mysterious visitor. It was small with black skin, bull horns, and wings sprouting from its back. An Identify revealed that it was a Demon. Yet it also revealed no hostility towards me.

It wasn't hostile? Was this one of the Phyllians' - demons? I had no time to make sure. Linford could be preparing for another attack, so I took my chances.

Are you a friend?

"What? Who's talking?"

Fult's voice came out of the demon. I didn't know the details, but at least it wasn't out to kill us.

I'm Teacher. The sword lying down in front of you.

"Wh-what? How is a sword talking?"

That doesn't matter right now! We have to get to Fran.

"R-right."

I ignored the demon and resumed my flight to Fran. When I got to her, another demon was propping her up and helping her dodge Linford's attacks.

Then one of Linford's beam attacks swallowed them both.

FRAN!

I screamed instinctively. When the beam faded, Fran was still there, encased in a red barrier.

"It's all right. Satya's taking care of her."

O-oh...

Thank God! I flew over to Fran and resumed healing her. Still, my Greater Heal wasn't enough to put her back to full strength.

"Teacher... Satya was..."

"Don't worry, Fran. These are only copies. Our real bodies remain unharmed."

"Really?"

"Yes."

“Good to know...”

How did you two get here? Did you pass through that barrier?

We had no time to waste on pleasantries. We needed a way out, and we needed it now. The Phyllians had attached the demons to Fran to protect her when she was in danger. I thought they were a little out of line, but since they had saved her, I didn’t complain. The prince and princess only did it out of concern for their friend.

These demons hadn’t bypassed the dome, then—they were already with Fran when we were trapped inside. However, Fult and Satya maintained a psychic link to these demons, so the dome couldn’t block out telepathy and other such powers. Unfortunately, teleportation was still impossible.

I see... Thank you. At least we have some sort of backup now.

Even a single demon was a great help, but their next words weren’t as encouraging.

“I’m sorry, but we’re at our limit...”

How come?

“The Malice under this dome is so great that our - demons are threatening to go berserk. Fran looks like she’s doing all right. I don’t think we can control these creatures for much longer.”

“But are you okay, Fult?”

“Like my sister said, these bodies are only copies. They have no bearing on our real selves.”

“I see.”

“I’ll use all of their power to heal you! I have to spend its power before I lose control!” Fult said in a hurry.

He sounded like his control was already slipping. When he healed her, it was much more powerful than Greater Heal. By the time he was done, Fran's body was unscathed. The demon's body started cracking and dissipated into fine sand. Having used up all its energy, it faded away.

"Stay alive, Fran!"

With Fult's final cry, the demon disappeared. Meanwhile, Satya's demon faded with the barrier protecting Fran.

"Aaah, there you are!!!" Linford spotted us immediately. The barrier must have hidden us from him.

He let out another volley of flaming Malice.

I won't let you hurt Fran any more!

I flicked through my status screen, frantically casting Short Jump over and over.

Speedcast is at Level 10. You have unlocked Unique Skill: Instant Cast

Instant Cast: Activates a spell immediately by saying its name. Increases amount of mana consumed.

Good enough for me! I planned on using the reduced casting time to dodge with Short Jump, but now I could expedite that process. That said, I was worried about how much more mana I would spend...

But I had to do it.

With Fran fully recovered, I took her and ran.

Short Jump!

Short Jump!

SHORT JUMP!

I kept blinking to dodge Linford's attacks.

I had to protect Fran.

"Gaaaah! How is this possible?! How are you able to use such advanced magic?! How do you already have Instant Cast?! Die! Die!!!"

Seeing us blink away like that frustrated the giant wizard. We had learned a new trick to survive his onslaught, and he was panicking.

That's it, panic! You're making it a lot easier for us to dodge! We'll keep on running, and the next thing you know, we'll move in for the kill!

And if that didn't work...I might have to use Unleash Potential.

"Teacher...?"

I'll take care of it, Fran.

"Hm..."

How long had our game of cat and mouse gone on?

Fran and Jet scored a hit from time to time, but Linford immediately regenerated. I had launched several Telekinetic Catapults at the monster, but none of my blows could finish it. If anything, it opened me to his counterattacks. I was knocked away mercilessly.

The battle was an endless nightmare. The only reason I hadn't fallen into despair was because Fran was with me. I would protect her, no matter what. That didn't mean I remained calm, however. I did my best to maintain my composure, so as not to worry her, but I was panicking on the inside.

The situation looked hopeless.

As my mana reserves ran dry and I reconsidered using Unleash Potential, a ray of hope shone through the dome. The heavens—or gods—had not abandoned us yet.

A chime like a bell echoed through the Cage of the Evil One.

And then the dome disappeared.

“What magic is this?!” Linford bellowed in shock.

What's going on?

No, this wasn't the time for speculation! This was our ticket out!

Let's get out of here, Jet!

“Arf!”

Dimension Jump!

Our escape proved successful this time. I leapt a hundred meters away and hid Fran in the shadows of a nearby building.

You all right?

“Yeah... More or less.”

Fran nodded despite the pain and exhaustion.

Good!

“Woof!”

“You okay, Jet?”

“Arf!”

We had escaped by a hair's breadth. If feline beastmen had nine lives, I think Fran was down to her last. We got really lucky!

“Nggaaaar!”

As we were still trying to process the situation, Linford let out a pained howl.

Something was hurting him.

What?

I stole a look at the giant Vilefiend.

What the hell is that?!

“That’s a lot of swords.”

Countless swords plunged through Linford’s body.

There were several figures around him.

The one crushed his right leg with its fists. Another pierced his left leg with its spear. One danced through the sky, and one sprinted on the ground. They joined forces to subdue Linford.

“They’re so strong.”

Yeah... Who are they?

We looked on, captivated, when a new challenger approached.

She came from behind us, attacking Linford with something lean and snakelike.

“Graaargh!”

A whip. Welts covered Linford’s gigantic body, and he reeled in pain.

Although the whip was too fast to see, it showed no sign of striking the other figures. It snaked about, as graceful as it was deadly. Only a master could pull off such complex maneuvers.

As the whip lashed, Linford let out a pathetic cry. The sound of his screams woke us from the hopeless nightmare we’d fallen into.

We turned around and saw the beauty holding the whip. Her emerald green cloak flapped in the wind as she calmly surveyed the battleground.

Fran's eyes widened as she looked at the woman.

"Amanda...?"

Amanda, the A-Rank adventurer of Alessa, had reached Bulbola.

"You'll be okay now, Frannie. I'm here to help!"

Forlund

An hour had passed since people started turning into monsters.

I had taken down thirty of them, but how many more were left? I didn't know whether this infection would spread to the rest of the city. I needed to destroy the source.

I headed towards the greatest concentration of Malice, cutting down the monstrosities in my path.

"Th-thank you for saving me!"

"..."

"Um...?"

"Oh..."

I motioned for the man to come to my side so I could escort him. It wasn't safe here, and he shouldn't waste time on pleasantries.

But he just turned pale, shouted an apology, and left. Why? I was willing to walk him to the nearest Knight Guard station. Perhaps he mistook my gesture as a sign to go away.

"Oh..."

This scenario had played out countless times. I was quiet, expressionless, and blessed with a mean face. I made no special effort to be intimidating...and I didn't like the

idea that I threatened people with a mere glance. I wasn't good with words, so I could at least work on my body language and hand gestures. Still, the man was terrified regardless. What was I supposed do?

"Nothing I can do but slay more monsters."

I looked around for a suitable vantage point and spotted a tall, four-story building—the tallest one in the neighborhood, probably the main office of a trade - association. I should be able to survey most of the city from here.

"Hmm..."

Found it. I felt a malicious presence, apparent even under cover of night. At least the creature was attacking livestock, not people. I could deal with it from here. My target was close enough at three hundred meters. I wouldn't miss.

"Pierce."

A blade appeared out of thin air and launched itself at my command. It flew faster than an arrow and was sharper than a spear. The blade stabbed the beast, and it went quiet. Having finished its duty, the blade faded and returned to the aether.

My Extra Skill, Blade God's Favor.

It recorded all the enchanted swords I ever touched and allowed me to reproduce them. The only exceptions were swords that were too strong for me.

The skill could only reproduce weapons which suited the situation, but after years of training I was could - manipulate them at will. Manifesting these blades for a shorter time reduced the mana consumption, and I could summon a hundred of them if I had to.

"Found you..."

This time, the creature was attacking a person. I jumped off the rooftop and rushed to the scene.

What was causing all this? I doubted it was natural. Malice emanated from all the monsters I had slain tonight, concrete proof that it was something not of this world. The energy reminded me of a great Fiend I killed once.

Something...or someone...was behind this. Perhaps a magivice malfunction or a wicked wizard's design. Whatever it was, I had to destroy the root cause.

Bulbola welcomed me when I lost my hometown. I would do everything to protect it.

"Forlund Harnoncourt shall strike you down."

Chapter 7: Chief of All Evil

“I didn't think you'd be fighting a giant so soon. You okay, Fran?”

“Hm.”

“Thank goodness!”

Relieved, Amanda gave Fran a firm hug.

Fran still couldn't believe her friend was actually here.

“What are you doing here, Amanda?”

“I came as soon as I got your message!”

How fast was she? We only sent our letter three days ago. Amanda explained that she used all the teleport skills she had to navigate mountains and forests in her march to Bulbola.

“I'm still a little bloated from all the mana potions I had to chug.”

Her feat was amazing regardless.

What about Alessa?

Amanda wasn't allowed to stray too far from the city. The A-Rank adventurer had to remain there to deter Raydoss from an invasion.

“They'll be fine. I left—I mean, Jean volunteered to take over.”

Isn't Jean a B-Rank?

“He's promoted to A-Rank on the battlefield.”

In fact, Raydoss was more afraid of him than they were of Amanda.

“Slaughterfield” Jean earned his nickname in the days of the Raydossian War. The necromancer was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. He commanded entire undead armies, made up of friend and foe alike. Stories of Jean’s undead army annihilating a five-thousand-strong Raydossian legion were still told in hushed tones in their barracks.

Now that I knew the story behind his nickname, Slaughterfield was a fitting title. The killing fields made an excellent recruitment house for his legion.

“Well, Fran, I’d love to stay and catch up, but I have to beat the tar out of the bastard who did this to you,” Amanda said, turning away.

Her eyes were stern and filled with anger.

“Be careful, Amanda...”

“Thank you, Fran. Your worry just made me a hundred times stronger!”

Amanda grinned. She waved at us and leapt into battle.

She sped towards Linford, raining whiplashes and spells upon the giant Vilefiend. A flick of her wrist cracked her whip as hard as one of our Sword Arts. That was the power of an A-Rank. This was a glimpse of our goal.

Are you watching this, Fran?

“Hm.”

The battle raged on.

Amanda wasn’t the only one. The other combatants were as strong, or stronger, than we were.

Suddenly, a hundred swords materialized out of thin air and shot towards Linford. We were close enough to see that each of them was enchanted.

We caught a glimpse of this skill before, while we were out gathering ingredients. The swords belonged to the adventurer we saw at the Haunt.

Name: Forlund Harnoncourt

Race: Human

Class: Skyblade

Level: 66/99

HP: 718; Magic: 431; Strength: 484; Agility: 437

Skills: Dagger Mastery 7; Disassemble 8; Danger Sense 6; Reveal Weakness 5; Aura Sense 7; Sword Arts 10; Advanced Sword Arts 6; Sword Mastery 10; Advanced Sword Mastery 7; Gathering 4; Kick Arts 5; Kick Mastery 6; Mental Status Resistance 4; Petrification Resistance 3; Elemental Blade 8; Jump 7; Throw 8; Poison Resistance 3; Dual Wielding 7; Magic Resistance 6; Paralysis Resistance 4; Spirit Manipulation; Dragon Killer; Beast Slayer

Class Skill: Halve Cost: Sword Arts

Extra Skill: Blade God's Favor

Titles: Blade God's Favorite; Haunt Liberator; Dungeon Conqueror; Dragon Killer; Beast Killer; A-Rank Adventurer

Equipment: Orihalcon Longsword; Orihalcon Swordbreaker; Dragonking Hide Armor; Blade God Helm; World Tree Bark Shoes; Dragoneater Spider Web Mantle; Bracelet of Mana Regeneration; Bracelet of Sacrifice

Forlund? That was the A-Rank Colbert talked about. Hundred Blade Forlund was as strong as Amanda.

His Extra Skill allowed him to reproduce any sword he had touched, with the exception of very strong enchanted blades.

Could he make a copy of me? It would be awkward either way, and I decided to stay away from Forlund.

Colbert was here too, and had gotten stronger from the last time we met. Demitris Style Arts? That looked like an interesting skill. He must have a piece of equipment with Fake Identity. Although I wasn't sure why he wasn't wearing it now.

All of the combatants were strong. Guildmaster Gammod swung his mighty hammer, staggering Linford. Phillip, the oldest of Christon's sons, was doing good, too. Although his stats lagged behind Fran, his stolid and robust fighting style was reassuring. He wielded his giant lance fiercely, even in full plate armor. Brook had planned to assassinate his brother as soon as he showed weakness. Looking at him now, he would've had to wait a long time for that.

Strangely enough, Theraclede was in the fight as well. I thought he was supposed to be our enemy. The Mad Warrior seemed to have betrayed his former master. Colbert wasn't attacking him either, so there must've been some reason. What bothered me was that his race was now Fiend and Hellion.

His Cannibalize skill gave me a really bad feeling. He wouldn't be able to use it on me or Fran, but perhaps it was why Theraclede was fighting together with us. Was he planning to Cannibalize Linford? He wasn't attacking us yet, but we couldn't let our guard down.

"Woof!"

Jet! Are you okay? Oh...guess not.

"Arf..."

As I consulted Fran on what to do with Theraclede, Jet staggered back to us. He was visibly singed and patches of his fur were burned off, making him look ragged and worn. He had suffered some deep wounds, too. I immediately applied some first-aid Healing.

“You okay, boy?”

“Woof.”

“You did good today.”

As Fran patted Jet’s neck, I felt someone approach. She showed no hostility as she peeked from behind the rubble.

“Um, are you two all right?”

“Charlotte?”

“Arf?”

Charlotte, graceful dancer and dependable big sister of the orphanage, came before us.

“It’s me. How are your wounds?”

“They’re all right. I’m just a little tired.”

Tired in both mind and body.

Charlotte wiped a bit of mud off Fran’s cheek. Fran let her do it, still watching the intense battle unfold in the distance.

They’re all so strong, she thought.

Yeah...

She wasn’t just admiring Amanda and the others. Now that we were safe, we could see that Linford was not the invincible monster we previously thought.

Why was I so focused on running away? Was there really no chance of fighting him?

I was afraid and lost long before we started fighting.

I was thinking the same thing when I spent my EP on Space-Time Magic. Fortunately, I had unlocked a Unique Skill. Because of that, I managed to save our lives.

Still, I wondered. What if I had shown a little bit more grit? Maybe put some points into Flame Magic or Advanced Sword Arts or Elemental Blade? We might have had a fighting chance.

Teacher.

Yeah?

This sucks.

Yeah...it really does.

Vexed, we watched Amanda and the others fight.

We had to get back to training once this battle was over. I was still far too weak. I knew that now.

No.

No. This battle was still going. If I felt frustrated about my lack of courage, why wait to redeem myself?

I didn't know it, but I was still trying to run away. I thought the battle was as good as won and we were no longer required.

What the hell was I thinking?!

Fran, we're going back in.

Of course. We'll get him back for what he did to us.

“Woof!”

Fran was faster on the uptake than I was.

There was no beating this girl.

“Are you returning to the fight?”

Charlotte looked worried as she saw Fran get up. I wondered if she was going to stop us. Instead, she held

Fran's hands and offered words of encouragement.

"Good luck out there, you two."

"Hm."

"Arf!"

"I won't be able join you, so allow me to do this much," Charlotte said as she lightly clasped her hands together.

The clear chime of a bell sounded, and a strange light enveloped Jet and Fran. Charlotte collapsed to her knees, her face drained of color.

"Charlotte! Are you okay?"

"W-woof?"

"I-I'm fine. I just used a little too much mana. I'll be back to normal once I rest."

"Don't force yourself," Fran said, worried.

Charlotte had a determined look on her face. She shook her head.

"I'm not very good at fighting. The least I can do...is bless you with the ability to exorcise Malice."

She really was a priestess.

"Were you the one who destroyed the giant dome?"

"Yes."

Wow. I didn't think that was possible with her stats.

Everyone's so strong, Fran thought.

They really are.

It wasn't a matter of how high your stats were. It was a matter of finding something you could do and devoting all your power to see it through. That was what mattered. Fran seemed close to a breakthrough.

What is it? I asked.

I'll fight, Teacher.

Her eyes shone with steady determination and valor.

Why?

I couldn't do anything while we were running away from Linford. You took care of everything. You always do. So I'm going to fight this time.

Fran...

It was my fault for not talking to her. We still had time, so I asked her.

Okay. What are you planning?

There's something I want to try out.

Which is?

I thought of a move that'll need your Overboost to work. Pulling this off is going to take all of our powers combined.

An attack that would require both of our abilities. Fran was confident that she could handle my maximum output. I liked the sound of it. I was so lucky to have been born again as a sword! Having Fran wield me, despite all my moping, made me feel like I could become a Godsword!

This might be the first time that Fran personally asked for me to use a skill to supplement hers.

You got it, I told her.

“Hm.”

“Fran, Jet, good luck out there.”

“Hm. I’ll be going now.”

“Woof!”

We rushed to return to the battlefield.

Charlotte

I knew Fran was a high-rank adventurer. I could never beat her, even at my best. Even then, I didn't expect her to be so strong.

I marveled as I watched her fight the terrible giant inside the dome. I knew she couldn't win, but I admired her regardless. No normal person could defeat that monster. You would need to be a guildmaster at the very least.

"But I can at least destroy this barrier...!"

My Class made me more sensitive to Malice than others. I knew that was what the dome was made from. I hesitated, thinking my powers wouldn't be enough. But I thought of Fran and brushed the anxieties aside.

I was going to break this dome. Fran was fighting for this city, as well as her life. I had to help.

I hurried towards the dome but was delayed in my efforts to rescue her. Monsters got in my way, and though I was able to defeat them, it took time that Fran didn't have. I asked the Knight Guard to take care of the orphanage while I was gone. I left alone. Now, I knew that was a mistake.

All I could do was head for the dome as fast as I could...

Suddenly, the famous adventurer Amanda called out to me.

I knew her name. The teacher at the orphanage told me Amanda was going to take care of the orphanage from now on. She owned many orphanages across the land. The one in Bulbola would be safe now. Fran was the one to contact her. I could never repay that debt. The least I could do was try and save her.

Other adventurers had gathered as well, united to fight the giant wizard. They were all so strong. They might as well

have been in a different galaxy to me. Even Steelclaw Colbert was taking orders in this party.

Colbert seemed to hold a grudge against a large man called Theraclede, but Amanda silenced them both with a glare. She wasn't an A-Rank for nothing. She and her party would definitely be able to save Fran. All I had to do was focus on what I did best.

I succeeded in taking down the barrier. Fran escaped, warping away with magic. I admired her all the more for being able to think so clearly in a dire situation.

All I could do now was leave the rest to Amanda and Forlund. They were so in sync, despite only having met today. Maybe they could only anticipate each other's movements because they were so experienced. They complemented each other's styles well, too. They fought so gracefully that it looked like they had rehearsed.

I wasn't frustrated. They were in a completely different league. Instead, I watched the battle unfold. It looked like a scene right out of a myth.

And yet Fran got up and moved to get a better view. She watched Amanda and the others fight, longing to join them.

The cruel extent of her injuries was apparent with a single glance at her bloodstained armor. She didn't look wounded, so maybe she took some life potions. Still, a life potion did nothing to heal mental exhaustion. Her face was still pale from fending off the giant on her own. Yet she wanted to return to the fight. I couldn't stop her if I wanted to.

When I saw the look in her eyes, I knew I mustn't.
And so I gave her a little help.

I used the rest of my power to bestow Fiend Breaker on her. I didn't know whether I could, since I'd already used it during the ritual, but it seemed to work. Both my stamina and mana were at their limits. I thought I lost a few years of my life pulling that off. But I was useless in the fight. This was the least I could do.

As Fran sped away, she turned to look at me one last time, concerned about my earlier collapse. I didn't mean to worry her... I hated myself for being so weak. I promised I would train if I survived this battle. I didn't want to feel this way.

"Good luck out there..."

Fran warped and jumped higher and higher. She must be planning to strike from the skies.

I watched her descend on the giant Vilefiend, wrapped in a pale blue glow.

We were right above Linford.

The giant hadn't noticed us since Amanda and Forlund were keeping him busy.

"Teacher, are you ready?"

Yeah! I'll handle backup! No more running away!

"I'll leave you to it."

I felt stronger just hearing the trust in her voice. Right now, we could do anything together. Fran's sword hand was hotter than usual. I could feel her heartbeat, her breath, and the fine movements of her hand.

"Let's go."

Let's do this.

Fran readied me and Air Hopped off Jet's back. She twisted her body and hung suspended in midair. The mana

thread supporting her was connected to two cubes of pressurized air.

We could tie an infinite number of mana threads in midair this way. Theoretically, we could run free through the air if we wanted to.

Fran leaned back into the mana rope until her weight pulled it taut. Once it reached maximum elasticity, she used the charged-up energy to launch herself straight down.

The technique reminded me of a wrestling move at first, but now that I think about it, it was more like a pinball machine.

The momentum surged us through the air.

Fran accelerated even further with Air Hops and Wind Magic. I used Air Current Manipulation to help reduce the drag. I also used Increase Weight, making myself weigh over fifty kilos. Fran cancelled out the side-effects with Reduce Weight and had no issue wielding me.

Soon, we reached Linford's giant body.

He still hadn't noticed us, thanks to our stealth.

I Transmogrified myself to Fran's specifications. Her suggestion surprised me when we discussed it. I took the form of a katana. I never told her about the weapon, but that's definitely what she described.

She must've mulled this over for a while.

"Hn?"

With twenty five meters to go, Linford finally turned towards us. We were in striking distance now. The giant glared at Fran with bloodshot eyes.

"Beastgirl! How did you survive?!" Linford screamed, unleashing a stream of purple smoke.

A cloud of Malice. It melted everything it touched, from armor to architecture. The move was difficult to evade.

How was Fran going to dodge this one?

“Seen that one before.”

She anticipated Linford’s purple smoke. She had already seen him use it.

“Vernier.”

Vernier was a flame spell which allowed the user to accelerate for a short time. The sudden acceleration took a toll on the user’s body, which made it difficult to use. It was easiest for straight line accelerations.

Fran protected herself with a thin layer of air and sped through the malicious gas. The trip barely grazed her. Charlotte’s barrier must’ve helped, and Fran smiled knowingly to herself.

Linford’s eyes bulged when he saw Fran accelerate through his poison smoke.

“Impudent beast! Hngh!”

Frustrated, Linford crossed his arms to protect his head.

Fool! He’d fallen for the trick of only paying attention to Fran’s eyes and murderous intent. She’d learned this trick from the master duelist Valuza during the Seedrun Conflict. Linford’s head was not our target.

“Haaa!”

Haaa!

Fran was targeting Linford’s torso.

I coordinated my skills with hers as we made contact, using Elemental Blade Fire, Vibrofang, and Venomfang.

Fran used the same skills to double the effect, but I could only stay in this state for a second. Any longer and my

blade would melt. But Fran had taken the tremendous strain into account.

A moment was all she needed. She drew me out of the air sheath.

The acceleration of the freefall, combined with the full force of her own quickdraw, created our ultimate attack. Our powers were concentrated into a single slash of blinding speed.

This was nothing like the brute force of my Telekinetic Catapult. It was a technical move, combining hyper--acceleration with impeccable timing.



“Gaaaaaargh!”

The slash left a blue glow as it cut Linford’s body from his left shoulder to his abdomen. Our attack cut right through his heart, and it lay exposed, pulsing eerily.

I felt the urge to shout for joy the moment our slash connected. Unable to resist, I let out a cheer which rivaled Jet’s howl.

YEEEEESSSSSS!!!

It was a different kind of satisfaction from absorbing crystal. It felt like I’d cut through the dark cloud of sorrow that hung over me. This was the first time I’d felt this kind of release, but I had no time to reflect on my emotions. Neither did I have time to see how Linford was doing. Fran was fast approaching the ground and I decelerated her with a well-timed Short Jump.

“Thanks, Teacher.”

That was close.

If I’d been a second late, she would’ve crashed into the earth.

Fran remained calm throughout her descent. Not out of conceit, but out of trust. She knew I wouldn’t let her down.

I regained my composure. The intense flood of emotion had settled. I needed to focus on the battle. We weren’t out of the woods yet.

We surveyed the giant wizard from a safe distance.

“Damn you! Damn you all!”

He had fallen to one knee and was screaming in pain. Blood gushed out of the great wound Fran had left, - depleting half of his health.

How was he not dead?! He was still breathing, though his heart had been cut in half. “Persistent” didn’t do him

justice. The giant wizard had the survivability of a cockroach. We weren't able to finish him, but no one could say that we didn't even the score.

We did it, Fran.

"Yeah! We made a finishing move!"

We could only use it in wide open spaces though. It was impossible to pull off in a dungeon, let alone indoors.

The quickdraw out of the air pressure sheath was much more forgiving in terms of space. Accelerating her draw with wind magic was a good way to get the drop on our opponent, too.

Normally, a quickdraw required you to carry your sword on your hip. But with the air sheath, Fran could use it from any angle.

Venomfang was already doing its job. I could tell from here that Linford was poisoned. We couldn't expect much out of it, since he had Fast Regeneration and Abnormal Status Resistance, but it was enough to keep his regeneration in check. He couldn't heal the damage Amanda's party were dealing him now.

"Fran's softened him up for us, boys! Rock his face off!"

"Hmph."

"No problem! Good job, Fran!"

"Affirmative!"

"I'll show you what a dwarf can do!"

"Ha ha ha! All of you look like you're worth killing, but I'll start with the old man tonight!"

On Amanda's command, the all stars piled onto Linford. We would've joined the offensive, but our ultimate attack took a good chunk of my durability. Even with Instant

Regeneration, it would take some time for my blade to recover. Fran, on the other hand, was fresh out of mana.

Forlund charged his mana blades, making them glow brighter than before, and launched toward the monster. Combined with Amanda's vertical whiplash, the attack took off Linford's right arm, along with the building behind it. Colbert launched the giant with an uppercut, allowing Phillip to take off his other arm with a shot of lightning from his spear. Then Gammel the Guildmaster crushed Linford's right foot with his warhammer.

"Graaaaargh! You vermin!"

"You're mine now! Give me your powers, old man!"

"Traitor...!"

Theraclede cut off Linford's remaining leg and topped the giant fiendmancer. He was going to Cannibalize him. We had to stop him somehow!

No, it's not over yet.

"Grrrr!"

Jet learned well from his master. He plunged down at Linford from the skies and sank his fangs into his neck, ripping a good chunk out. He activated Shadow Walk before he hit the ground, making it look like the earth had swallowed him.

Jet took the best part for himself!

"Aaargh... How could I have lost...to these insignificants...!"

Linford croaked his last words resentfully. His skin shriveled and cracked, and soon the giant mage withered away to dust.

It was an awful way to go.

"You goddamn mongrel! You keep getting in my way!" Theraclede said, annoyed.

Jet had been the one to interrupt his ambush on Colbert and the others.

Seeing that everything worked out, Fran sat down, exhausted.

"Ruff..."

Jet returned as we looked at Linford's remains. But his demeanor was strange, and it appeared that he was bleeding from the mouth. What happened?

Jet, are you okay?!

"Was it Linford?"

"Urf..."

We looked into his mouth. His fangs were cracked. His canine snapped in the middle, gushing blood.

It made sense, now that I thought about it. Our plunging attack depleted most of my Durability. Jet had done a similar move and was paying for it with his teeth.

Don't go too crazy now.

"Woof."

"That was really cool, though."

"Arf!"

I quickly administered some healing.

Fran has leveled up

Fran has leveled...

The P.A. rang in my head. Linford was definitely dead. Our battle was finally over.

We got a lot of EXP from beating such a strong opponent.

Fran, Jet, Amanda, Forlund, Colbert, Phillip, Gammod, Theraclede, and Charlotte. Our EXP was split nine ways, and Fran still managed to hit level 40. She was only five levels away from her cap now. I wondered what would happen when we reached it. I was as excited as I was anxious.

We got a number of skills and titles out of the fight. Fiend Killer was awarded to anyone who killed a Vilefiend. We also obtained Malice Resistance 1 from the beating we'd taken from Linford's spells.

I was sure Jet had leveled up too, and he had two new skills: Malice Sense and Malice Resistance. Odd, considering Jet didn't take nearly as much punishment as Fran did. Did he get it with Predator? I mean, it allowed him to take the skills of the creatures he ate, and he took a huge bite out of Linford with his last attack, flesh and blood included. I suppose that was the source of his new skills.

He was fine, but I thought it'd be better if he laid off the Fiend diet...

With the battle over, I wanted to let Fran rest in a comfortable bed. The fight might be over, but the conflict was not.

Teacher, we need to go after Zelyse, Fran said in a matter-of-fact way.

Once she regained her composure, she pulled herself up—using me as a makeshift walking stick.

You can rest for a while longer.

No. We have to move quickly.

Her mind was made up. My wielder's motivation rubbed off on me.

Jet, can you still track him down? I asked.

“Urf...”

His sense of smell was overwhelmed by the battle. Jet was exhausted and couldn’t track as well as usual. We could ask Theraclede. I figured he might know something.

Uh, where’d Theraclede go?

“He’s gone?”

“What? The Mad Warrior is missing!” Amanda shouted in surprise, looking around.

When did he make his exit? He was still with us when Linford died.

“Over there!” Amanda pointed.

Theraclede was standing a good fifty meters away.

“That dumb dog got in my way again! I would’ve made the final blow if not for him! Well, I still got a piece of the old man, anyway! I’ll be taking my leave now!”

“Get back here!”

Colbert chased after him, but Theraclede was one step ahead.

“Ha ha! See you later, suckers!”

“What? He teleported?”

Amanda gaped at Theraclede’s sudden disappearance. The spell must be a part of Fiendmancy, since Linford had used it, too. It must come with certain requirements though, since neither of them could use it in quick succession.

“Damn it. I wanted to cash in his bounty, since he’s been on the run for so long! I’ll get him next time!”

The Mad Warrior was long gone. Maybe we should chase him down with Amanda and the rest? No, Zelyse was more important.

"The Malice remains," Forlund muttered, reminding me about the Fiendstones in the temple.

We should destroy them before they did anything funny.

"It might be the Fiendstones."

"What is a Fiendstone?"

Fran told the party about the dark crystals. They swallowed and went through the rubble in search of them. Soon, Charlotte joined us, too.

The priestess was sensitive to Malice and was instrumental in finding the Fiendstones. They were buried deep in the earth, but it was nothing Gammod's Earth Magic couldn't solve.

"So this is a Fiendstone..."

"It's putting out a lot less Malice than before."

Fran was right. They were emitting far less dark energy than before Linford's transformation.

"And these were in the temple?"

"Linford put them there."

"I see..."

"Figure anything out, Charlotte?"

"Just a guess."

According to Charlotte, temples were connected to the divine realm. They were the dwelling places of gods, and oracles could use them to communicate with the divine. It was what gave temples the ability to change a person's Class. The gods themselves maintained this pathway, so humans couldn't abuse it.

Charlotte suggested that the Fiendstones might twist this pathway, pointing it towards the Evil One himself.

Colbert couldn't believe it, but Amanda and Gammod agreed that it was a nonzero possibility. The powers of the Evil One were wrapped in mystery.

The Evil One lost the war with the gods at the dawn of the world, and parts of him were sealed in temples all across the lands. His core was said to be guarded by the gods themselves. It sounded like myth, but after what we'd seen tonight, I was willing to believe it.

In any case, we all agreed that the Fiendstones should be destroyed. Once Amanda and her party had ground them to dust, Forlund set fire to the remains with a spell. The only loose end now was Zelyse.

"Amanda, I need your help."

"Sure!"

"You're not going to wait for me to tell you?"

"Don't have to. How can I refuse a request coming from you? What do you want?"

Fran thanked Amanda for her frankness and told everyone about Zelyse. The remaining conspirator was still on the loose, and he was definitely plotting something.

"The alchemist Zelyse... I didn't know he was still in this city. I'll avenge my brothers yet."

"I haven't heard that name in a while. I thought someone already finished the job!"

"The Mad Warrior might be with him."

"Looks like I'll have to beat him up for the children!"

"Indeed."

With everyone pumped up, we would find him in no time.

But then I saw it was unnecessary.

"For all his talk, Linford sure went down in a hurry."

Zelyse had shown himself.

He stood on top of a pile of rubble, a condescending grin on his lips.

He was here in the flesh now, although I still couldn't identify him.

"I have some good news for you all. Our plan has failed! My main conspirator's dead. I didn't get the souls I wanted, and I can't really break the seal of the Evil One on my own. I can't use Fiendmancy, you see," he bragged with a faint smile.

I didn't know why he would want to boast about his failure.

"But you're always getting in my way, Fran. You killed Linford and his men, stole my Cure Turmeric, a vital - ingredient for Fiend Water, and sold the bread you made with it at a cooking contest. You stole my Soul Essence, too. Not to mention you got in the way of Charlotte's kidnapping during the ritual of purification."

He had wanted to kidnap Charlotte to put a stop to the ritual.

"Why Charlotte?"

"Linford wanted her for some reason."

They wanted Charlotte for a dark ritual. It would have the opposite effect from the one she performed during the Moons Festival and create Malice instead of purification. Then she would be the sacrifice. They'd only lent money to the orphanage so they could force them to hand her over. This part of their plan failed when Weint asked for the recipe instead of the girl.

"If things went according to plan, I would have all the children of the orphanage. They make great test subjects,

you know."

Zelyse was scum, but I almost felt sorry for him.

Amanda's desire to slaughter the smug bastard started mounting the second she heard what he planned for the orphans. That was over the line for the A-Rank. Zelyse just made it to the top of her kill list.

But someone else felt just as murderous, and that someone else was Fran.

Zelyse was annoying to begin with, but the things he said completely infuriated her. Fran was close to the kids at the orphanage. It was personal now.

"Well, I would love to stay and chat, but I must be going."

"You're running away?"

"Of course I am! No point in carrying out the rest of my plan with Linford dead. I was going to mass produce Fiends to kill the people of the city. Then, I could use their souls to break the seal of the Evil One's Flesh Lump. It would've worked too, if Linford succeeded in drawing the Evil One's power via the temple, but as things stand—"

Teacher.

I know.

Fran only said my name, but I knew her intent.

I teleported us behind the mad alchemist, and she swung me right at him. Fran launched her attack without delay, almost before the spell could end. It would've been impossible to pull off without our perfect harmony.

"!"

I got front row seats to see Zelyse's dumbstruck expression. Emphasis on "dumb."

Got you!

Zelyse disappeared, melting away into the aether just as I grazed his neck. He wasn't using Space-Time Magic! I knew that for sure.

We were so close.

Hm...!

Fran bit her lip in frustration.

Jet! Track him down!

"Arf..."

Jet shook his head regretfully. Zelyse's scent was gone.

Guess not.

"Woof..."

Aww, I'm not blaming you, boy. It's not your fault.

Jet might have the greatest nose in the world, but he would be hard-pressed to track down a teleporting foe.

I know it's frustrating...but let's do something else.

"Hm. There's still Fiends to clean up."

Yeah. Even then, our job's not over.

Fran needed some rest, but we couldn't leave the city to fend for itself. I doubted she could rest with the situation as it was anyway.

"Well, travelling in a pack is a waste of our talents, I think. Let's split up and exterminate some monsters!"

Gammod barked out our marching orders.

YEAH!!!

And the all stars went their separate ways.

We should get going, too.

"Hm!"

"Woof!"

Zelyse

“Phew. I will never get used to that girl!”

Beastgirl Fran of the Black Cat Tribe. The weakest of the beastman tribes turned out to be the greatest wrench in my plans.

My blood froze as I parted from her. To think that such a young girl had the cold determination to lop someone’s head off. She teleported without warning, and I only sensed her when she was already behind me.

A terror of a girl. So used to killing at such a young age.

What was she? I hadn’t been this interested in someone for a long time.

“Heh heh. Well, I still won our match because I managed to escape—urk!”

A splatting sound.

“What?”

Followed by warm fluid trickling down my neck. It was blood, of course.

Warm red blood flowed with every beat of my heart.

“She grazed me.”

I trembled. She had imbued her sword with a potent toxin.

“Oh, this is bad.”

I hurried to take out an alchemic potion and downed it. The elixir served to heal all status ailments and wounds, and produced blood in its user. I emptied the bottle. My wounds closed, the trembling stopped, and my clouded vision turned clear again.

"And here I thought I made the perfect escape."

When was the last time I felt panic like this? She might have taken off my head if I delayed my teleportation by even a millisecond. If the graze were deeper, the poison might have prevented me from drinking the antidote.

That girl was a thorn in my side.

"I'm wearing my good robes, too."

My blood was unusual, thanks to a chain of human experimentation. As such, getting it out of clothing was difficult. I wondered what would happen if it came in contact with Cleansing Magic.

"Black Cat Fran...I hope we meet again. I would love to experiment on you."

Morning rose on the horrors of the night before.

"Here you go."

"Be careful, it's quite hot."

"Hm."

We were at our food cart, handing out curry bread for free. Well, not entirely free. The Count was still compensating us for our goods. There wasn't even much of a difference in our profit margin compared to regular sales.

After Zelyse got away, we spent the night hunting down the remaining Fiends. We took down about ten of those monsters by ourselves. Forlund racked up twenty. None of the abominations were left by sunrise, and peace started returning to the city.

The cooking contest was cancelled for obvious reasons. A lot of people were dead, and the city was in disarray. Not to mention that some members of the Chefs' Guild had been in Brook's pocket.

An abrupt end to the contest would only make the people more anxious, of course. So we rolled our food cart out and gave curry bread to anyone who wanted it. Even if they weren't freshly fried, they still served to lessen the severity of the emergency.

We didn't mind. We had a lot of curry bread left over, and we were still getting compensated for them. The other contestants agreed to it, too.

"No fighting now! We still have lots to give away!"

"This was in the running to win the entire cooking contest. You can't afford to miss it!"

Fran, let's move to the next spot.

The Crimson Maidens were doing a great job at pulling in customers. We'd offered to use Jet as our lovable mascot, but the Count shot that idea down. The citizens of the Bulbola didn't need another reason to feel uneasy. He also cited hygiene reasons, since Jet was much too big, prompting our direwolf to sulk in a corner.

The Count didn't have to go that far!

Fran offered to help promote our curry bread, but the Crimson Maidens refused out of pride. They might have been inferior to a little girl in terms of fighting strength, but they were definitely the better saleswomen. The girls were very insistent.

The Count asked us to distribute our bread as much as we can.

"Hm."

Later, Phillip visited our food cart to hand us our payment.

We learned a lot from him. The Count took all - responsibility for what happened in the Christon family. The family wasn't getting kicked out of Bulbola though. They

established the city two hundred years ago, and now the eldest had played a major role in resolving the crisis. That didn't change the fact that the second and third sons were planning a coup. They would be remembered for bringing shame to the family. Phillip intended to give the people of Bulbola what was rightfully theirs. Handing out free food was part of his plan.

Although the citizens knew about the apparent corruption of the Count's sons, the prince said they were ignorant of what went on beneath it.

We'd returned to the Count's estate after cleaning up the remaining Fiends. Fult and the others welcomed us back with an embrace. They were too worried to sleep. I couldn't say I blamed them. After Linford defeated their demons, the prince and princess left the estate to help Fran, much to the protests of Sellid. But the battle was already over by the time they reached the temple. All that was left was a mountain of rubble. We were out killing Fiends at the time, but there was no way for Fult and Satya to know.

That was how the Phyllian royals came to their sleepless night. Their vigil continued until Fran unceremoniously showed up. Satya was crying, which was normal enough. But I was quite surprised to see Fult crying, too. Had he fallen for her? I would usually intervene with a telekinetic shove, but I decided not to ruin the moment. Maybe he was just worried.

I'll let you off this time, prince, but there won't be a next!

The real mess came after that. With my identity revealed, there were a barrage of questions from the twins. Fran told me she didn't want to keep any secrets from them. Well, she got her wish. We told them our story from the beginning.

They were astonished that the mysterious cooking master turned out to be a sword.

"To think that a sword can cook so well... The world is a mysterious place."

Fran apologized for not telling them earlier, but the twins weren't angry with her. They understood the need for secrecy, since they were in possession of a Godsword. Although it was highly likely a spell prevented them from talking too much about the divine weapon.

We slept in Satya's room afterwards. Her chamber was more than suited for a princess. The room was ten times more luxurious than I initially thought. The curtains looked like they were made from a mineral weave.

I didn't know whether to call it a stroke of good luck or terrible misfortune, but the battle with Linford had forced me to reveal myself to Fran's closest friends. The consequences were as difficult as the fight had been.

Is the town really going to be all right? I said, recalling our conversation with Phillip. *The Alchemists' Guild is destroyed, the Count is stepping down, and a lot of people are dead.*

It was going to take some time before Bulbola could get back on its feet.

"I'm worried about the orphanage."

Amanda's there to take care of them. They'll be fine.

"Yeah. Amanda wouldn't make kids cry."

I'm more worried about the Chefs' Guild. I don't think they'll fall apart immediately, but...

"!"

Fran's eyes widened, and she sat straight up.

Fran? You okay, there?

“Without the contest we can’t go to the finals...”

Well, yeah.

“Then he can’t eat our curry!”

Oh, right. The old man.

“He got away!”

No, he did not. There’s nothing we could’ve done about it anyway.

I’d completely forgotten about Fran’s little feud. I wondered if the old gourmand was doing all right. He wasn’t a bad guy, and I wished him well.

Just as we were setting up our food cart, Meckam, the man in question, appeared. It almost made me think that he’d overheard my thoughts. He looked cross as usual, waiting impatiently for us to finish our preparations. He must want a piece of our curry bread.

“Hm?”

“I came, just as I promised.”

“Have a seat. You’ll need it.”

“Don’t keep me waiting.”

Meckam grinned back at Fran. Judith was creeped out. Lydia’s eyes sparkled as she saw the beginning of the duel. Maya, well...I had no idea what she was thinking. The ditz was a lot harder to read than her self-proclaimed cool girl teammate.

Meckam waited by the side of the cart. Ten minutes later, Fran presented him with a single plain curry bread.

“Well, then.”

I was nervous now. I’d had confidence in it so far, but now it would be judged by an actual food critic. He gobbled it down, savoring every morsel.

“Hm.”

“Well?”

“It’s a shame I still have other foods to taste.”

Uh, did that mean he liked it?

“Your fried bread is not only a novelty, but a delicious novelty. The contrasting textures must’ve been difficult to achieve. Your curry filling was specifically tailored to match the fried bread, bringing the best out of both ingredients. Your master has written the first recipe in the newest page of the cooking world. Tell him I think this is a wonderful dish, made with care and originality.”

That was the longest food review I’d ever gotten, but I’d take it! He liked it!

“You’re welcome.”

“I am sorry that this contest ended midway.”

“Hm? But it’s not the guild’s fault.”

“Even so. Some of our members were accomplices to the conspiracy. We are not entirely without blame. I challenged you to come to the finals with a dish that would impress me, but the finals are no more. I’m sorry. Your curry bread definitely would’ve taken you there.”

Did he come all this way just to keep his promise? The old gourmet was more of a gentleman than I thought.

“Your curry bread is delicious, and I apologize for my previous sentiments. Your master is truly a great chef.”

“Hah!”

Fran, you’re supposed to be graceful here, not rub your victory in his face!

Fortunately, the old man didn’t seem to mind Fran’s showboating.

Boy, was I getting tired though. We needed a break from handing out curry bread. I wasn't doing anything to warrant a break, you say? Oh, but I was. I still kept watch in case anything bad happened. Also, I cooked all of the curry bread we had in our Pocket Dimension, so there.

A sudden influx of people came to our cart, and the line got much longer. I overheard them saying that Meckam's choice couldn't be wrong. The old man was famous here in Bulbola.

"Uh, why are all these people here?"

"We can't keep up."

"I bet they're here because of how hot I am!"

Our break would have to be put off until later. We would've made a lot of money with this many customers... Phillip's compensation money was enough, I guess. We made profit just on that.

We've made a lot of money since coming to Bulbola.

Phillip's compensation was close to a million gold, and we still had monster materials to sell.

"Yeah. We can buy a lot of stuff now."

Anything tickle your fancy, Fran? Maybe an ingredient you want me to work with?

"Of course. But that's not what I have in mind."

For once, food wasn't Fran's top priority. That was odd. Did she want some girly accessories? Maybe a cute dress?

No, of course not.

"I want to spend it on crystal."

Crystal?

"Yeah. We'll buy crystal for you to absorb so you can rank up. We might be able to find some for sale here."

Are you sure?

I felt bad that she wanted to buy crystal for me. Not that I was stingy or anything. I didn't mind spending money on potions, equipment, and food. But all these supplies were for Fran. I always thought of crystal as something I needed to get by myself.

Of course, I knew that if I got stronger, Fran would get stronger as well.

It was time for it, I supposed. I hadn't had many opportunities to absorb crystal since we got to Bulbola.

It might be easier for us to start buying crystal from now on. My rank requirement was steadily climbing. Leveling up would only get harder.

"I'll sell everything we don't need and use the money for crystal."

Yeah. We might get some leads if we ask the guild and the LTA.

We were looking for whole, high-rank crystal. The contents of our Pocket Dimension were starting to look like a shipwreck, so some spring cleaning would do it some good.

As soon as we finished administering curry bread, we went to the Lucille Trade Association to meet our friend Captain Rengill. It was nice seeing he wasn't hurt during the ordeal.

"Thank you for waiting. Here is your money, and I'll get someone to take your goods right away"

Our main goal was to get rid of the clutter we had gathered in our Pocket Dimension. We sold everything from low tier magivices to equipment and jewelry.

I thanked Rengill for seeing us so late at night.

Letting go of some pieces of equipment was difficult. Like the King Cobra Dagger with the Venomlord Fang skill and the Nether King Cloak. I steeled myself through it and felt much better with a tidier Pocket Dimension. We netted a total of six and a half million gold. I could feel my monetary senses twisting.

Now for the crystal.

“Hm.”

“So about the crystal you asked for...”

Rengill hesitated. Was he going to back out of our deal?

“Bulbola is in the middle of a crystal shortage.”

“How come?”

“The Alchemists’ Guild bought it all up recently. Anything over D-Threat is hard to come by.”

Zelyse! That fiend had gone too far!

“But you do have some.”

“Yes. Only five, but all of excellent quality.”

We had asked for quality over quantity, but it looked like he went out of his way to get the cream of the crop.

“However...because of the shortage, our prices have gone up.”

Now the already pricey high-rank crystal was even more expensive. The five crystal Rengill prepared for us priced at a total of four million gold, but we didn’t have much choice.

The Adventurers’ Guild didn’t sell crystal to individual adventurers. If the LTA couldn’t provide us with it either, then we were out of luck in Bulbola.

Identify couldn’t tell what skills a crystal held, but it could tell its rank. Three B-Threats and two C-Threats. I

didn't think Rengill would take advantage of us, so I decided that the price was right. We'd done an expensive bit of shopping tonight... I hoped the skills weren't duds. That would be the worst.

"Junk crystal are the only ones we have left."

"Junk crystal?"

"Yes. That's what we call crystal that are lower than G-Threat. Usually they come from goblins and fanged rats and the like."

"And you have a lot of them?"

"I bought them up to hedge against the crystal shortage, but...I don't think there's any real way to use them."

Teacher?

Take it. It's not a bad deal.

Goblins had a lot of skills, despite their low level. Might as well buy them all while we were here. We bought three hundred junk crystal, along with some daily use ones. I had no idea what they were for, but they all contributed to my counter.

"Are you sure? I'll remind you again that these are junk."

"No problem."

"All right. You've really helped me out tonight, so let me add a little something on top."

This crystal pile cost us a hundred thousand gold. Crystal prices only started to skyrocket from D-Threat upward. E-Threats were on the cheaper side, since they could be used by normal civilians. The most expensive of them all, the crystal of an Icerock Ape, only cost us three thousand gold.

We'll absorb them tonight.

"Hm!"

Our lease on the old restaurant ran out tomorrow, so we should still be able to sleep there tonight. As much as I wanted to indulge myself with crystal, we had a promise to keep. Colbert was planning a wrap up party even before the contest was cancelled. He was waiting for us when we got to the meeting spot.

"Where are we going?"

"I know a really good restaurant. Just you wait!"

"Hm. Looking forward to it."

"Please do. Not that it holds a candle to your master's cooking, of course! Where is he anyway? He didn't get hurt last night, did he?"

"No, he's fine now."

I regenerated pretty fast. But Fran's implication freaked Colbert out. He grabbed her shoulders and started screaming. She would've countered him if he wasn't a friend.

"Wh-what?! Are you sure he's okay? Does he need potions?! I'll get him the finest life potion money can buy!"

"Hm..."

Fran was speechless. Steelclaw Colbert was somewhat of a fanboy.

"Colbert, what are you doing to her?" Judith cut in at just the right time.

"F-Fran's master was hurt! We are in danger of losing one of the hands of the gods! It's up to me to nurse him back to—"

"Yes, all right. Just don't cause a scene. Please."

“Wow, what a creep.”

“So much for the dignity of a B-Rank.”

The three girls’ comments finally knocked some sense back into him.

“Wha—! When did you get here?”

“For a while now, thank you.”

“Creep.”

“You seem happy, though. What happened?”

“Ah. Well, you see—”

Lydia’s question made Colbert go off the rails again. The four of us ended up dragging him to the place he reserved.

Thirty minutes later.

“Munch, munch, munch.”

“What do you think? Good, isn’t it?”

“Hmm!”

Fran moved her chopsticks tirelessly. That usually meant she liked the food. She was already on her tenth plate.

“Did you hear? They’re sending new alchemists from the capital to reestablish the guild here.”

“But they got booted out of the crystal fast lane. They won’t be able to buy up all the crystal they want anymore.”

So the alchemists weren’t completely dissolved. Bulbola was a trade hub and a convenient place for the alchemists to conduct research. Still, the government decided to put restrictions on them to prevent an incident like last night from happening again.

“I hear the Count’s second and third sons died in the riots.”

“Oh, those idiots.”

“I hear the monsters tore them up.”

Consensus was already beginning to form. I heard that the government was going to announce that Brook and Weint had died from a disease. If I knew Phillip, he wouldn’t appreciate this bending of the truth.

“So many rumors, and it hasn’t even been a day.”

“I hear it’s a prelude to the resurrection of the Evil One.”

“I heard that it was Raydossian spies who did it.”

“My sources tell me that demons showed up to beat the monster and save the townsfolk.”

“Yes, very imaginative. What would demons be doing in this city?”

“You know how rumors are.”

Fran was too engrossed in her meal to hear the three girls comparing notes. They knew it, too. The girls let out a resigned sigh and got back to their meal.

And so began the great eating contest.

“This place is famous for being as good as it is cheap.”

“The meat is so wonderful.”

“I could do this all day.”

“You guys need to calm down!”

“Food tastes better when you’re not paying for it.”

Teasing and laughter went about the table. Fran was smiling too, though I was the only one who could see it. I remembered something I wanted to give Colbert. Might as well give him my token of appreciation before I forgot.

“Colbert, this is from Teacher.”

“A note?”

Colbert opened the small piece of folded paper and immediately froze.

“Wha... By the gods! I-I-Is it really all right for me to take this? Am I dreaming?” he stuttered frantically.

“What is it, Colbert?”

“Again, gross.”

“A treasure map, perhaps?”

“Do you think Fran’s master would give me such a worthless object, Lydia?! Thank you so much, Fran! I’ll treasure it all my life...”

I was glad that he liked it. The note contained the recipe of our curry bread. Colbert had the Cooking skill, so I figured he could put it to good use. We enjoyed the rest of our dinner and the girls tried to calm Colbert down before he passed out. When it was over, we headed back to our lease. Fran hummed to herself the entire way home. The party left her in a good mood.

“Woof...”

On the other hand, Jet was practically dragging his feet.

Oh, cheer up, Jet. There’s always next time.

“Ruff...”

Jet was not allowed in the restaurant and was unable to sample its delectable cuisine. He was starting to hate the words “No pets allowed.”

Come on, boy. Have some Ultra-hot, it’ll cheer you up!

“Woof...”

We arrived at the old restaurant ten minutes later. It was much lonelier now that the cooking tools were put away. At least I could absorb the crystal we bought from the LTA.

Time for me to get a meal in.

“Should we start with these?”

Fran took out the five most expensive crystal and arranged them in a line.

“Here you go.”

Thanks.

I pierced the crystal one by one.

Ooooh!

An immediate sense of satisfaction filled me. It was so intense I couldn’t stifle a moan. The crystal was refreshing with a deep aftertaste and buttery texture. They were as delectable as their rank indicated. I was full after looking at my crystal counter and skills, too.

The five crystal amounted to fifteen thousand points in total. I even unlocked the rare skills Frost Magic, Steel Magic, and Moonlight Magic. It felt like getting a bonus for working extra hours at my job.

It was a different kind of satisfaction from dealing a fatal blow to Linford. This one felt more primal, more akin to eating a good meal. Like having my batteries fully charged.

Compared to that, killing Linford was like the righteous rush you felt after punching someone you knew was in the wrong. How I managed to feel these emotions, I didn’t know. My blade was filled with mysteries.

“These are next.”

All right.

Fran prepared the next batch of crystal. They were tiny compared to the last five, but what they lacked in size they

more than made up in quantity.

“Here you go, Teacher.”

Ooh, that's the stuff!

I asked Fran to fill the bathtub with crystal. The magical gems sparkled, inviting me to bathe in them.

Woo hoo!

Unable to resist, I dove right in.

Why? Because it was a tub full of crystal. Trillionaires back on Earth used to bathe in heaps of cash, didn't they? Some even bathed in pudding. As an Intelligent Weapon, I just chose to cover myself with crystal.

“Having fun?”

So much fun, like you can't imagine!

What started as a quick way to absorb large amounts of crystal soon became the most fun I'd had since coming to this world. I understood the thrill of trillionaires bathing in cash. I was a snob and proud of it!

AHAHAHA!

At my slightest movement, I absorbed crystal and all the satisfaction that came with it. I was in Intelligent Weapon heaven.

Ten minutes later.

“Teacher...”

“Ruff...”

I'm so sorry.

By the time I came to my senses I had lost my dignity as Fran's guardian. The looks Fran and Jet gave me were enough to pierce my hardened blade.

L-Look, if there's anything you guys want, you can just tell me, all right?

"I wanna eat curry for every meal for a week, starting tomorrow."

"Woof."

Again with the curry? But now was not the time to refuse.

S-sure! Of course!

"Hm."

"Woof."

I needed to lift the mood somehow. To get back my dignity as the primary weapon of our party!

I-I got seven hundred crystal points out of that.

"Not bad."

"Woof."

But they kept staring at me coldly.

H-hey! How about we go see Charlotte before we set out for Ulmutt?

"Sure."

Let's get going then!

"Hm."

"Arf!"

Just when I thought I successfully threw them off the scent, Fran and Jet looked down on me demandingly.

"Don't forget about the week's worth of curry."

"Woof, woof."

All right...

Epilogue

Morning came. We stood at the gates of Bulbola.

"It really is goodbye this time..." Satya sobbed, hugging Fran.

The princess had come to see her friend off on her journey. At first glance, it looked like Fran was just standing there. But I knew the truth. She gripped the edge of her shirt tightly. She didn't want to say goodbye, either.

"Why not just come with us, Fran?" Soph, the former urchin, asked.

He looked lonely, but Fran only answered with a shake of her head.

"I already know where I'm going."

"Then change your destination! We can serve the prince together."

"I have to do this alone."

"But we're already friends..."

"Yeah..."

Little Tenyl and the girl Altie followed suit. Fult did his best to console them, although he looked sad as well.

"Come now. Fran has important things she must take care of," Fult said, holding back tears.

Even now, he was still the looker. Not that good looks were enough to win Fran over.

"Fult's right. Besides, it's not like this is our final goodbye."

“We would love it if Fran could join us back in Phyllius. We considered filing another bodyguard request for her.”

“We were even willing to pay a handsome fee for it.”

“Does that mean—!”

“No. We are not about to abuse our royal office,” Prince Fult stressed, shaking his head. “We wouldn’t be friends anymore if I did that.”

“We would like to remain as equals with Fran. As friends.”

The three kids quieted down after that. I guessed that they agreed with what the twins said.

Fran remained expressionless, but I knew that she was happy on the inside. Her ears twitched ever so slightly.

“I’ll be seeing you.”

“Indeed we shall.”

“Promise me you’ll visit Phyllius when you get the chance.”

“Yeah, I promise.”

With one last embrace, Fran hopped on Jet’s back.

“Goodbye, Fran!”

“We’ll see you soon!”

“Take care of yourself!”

As the kids waved farewell, Fran smiled.

“Bye, you guys... Let’s go, Jet.”

“Woof.”

Jet heeded his master and bounded away.

“Goodbye, Fran, Jet! Godspeed!”

“Take care of her, Teacher!”

That Fult... He really didn't need to butter me up.

Fran didn't turn around to face them. She couldn't. If she did, she knew she'd run back.

You held it in to the very end.

"Uaah..."

I stroked her back and wiped the tears that rolled down her face. Fran let them flow freely. That was all right. She would feel better after letting it all out.

I turned my attention to the skies.

Clear blue as far as the eye could see.

Perfect weather to set out on an adventure.

Fran was close enough to the people she had left behind to shed tears. That might be the best thing to come out of our stop in Bulbola.

We promised we would see them again. Let's see to it that we do.

"Yeah!"

I patted Fran's head as I thought of our next step.

Ulmutt was a five day trip from here.

When we got there, we would level up in its two dungeons. After that, the Ulmutt Fighting Tournament. We'd settle for nothing less than total victory.

I wonder what Ulmutt's like.

"Dungeons... I'm looking forward to it," said Fran. She was feeling better already. "I'm going to be a lot stronger by the time I meet them again."

You know it.

"So strong that I could take on a Linford on my own."

I can see it happening.

We needed a lot of work, but she might as well shoot for the moons.

“Time for some dungeon crawling!”

That's the spirit. Step on it, Jet! No breaks until we get to Ulmutt!

“Woof, woof!”

“We're gonna win that fighting contest!”

READ ME ←
RIGHT-TO-LEFT



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